

THE LOG OF NO LADY

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THE LOG OF A N.O.'S WIFE
MISTRESS OF NONE
THE CAD'S GUIDE TO CRUISING
WITHOUT MAKE-UP
HOLIDAY MOOD

THE LOG OF NO LADY

*Being the story of a London woman
evacuated before the outbreak of war*

BY
URSULA BLOOM



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I

I Go to the Country

THE whole thing began one Sunday in August, 1939.

My husband and I had been hunting for a country cottage, a dream long cherished, but apparently impossible of materialization, because we had spent every week-end this way for over a year. On this particular Sunday it was the same week-end, with the same result; nothing happened. We took out the car, and travelled a hundred and sixty miles, making the more intimate acquaintance of three dilapidated cottages, the names and descriptions of which had been sent to us by optimistic agents, who must have seen them through very different eyes from our own. They were hopeless.

We had lunched, picnicking by the roadside, unfortunately in exactly the same spot as that chosen by a horde of particularly vicious horseflies. The afternoon's search for a cottage was equally abortive, and we were not feeling at our best when we returned to London.

"It seems that it is always the same," said Robbie. But this wasn't quite the same.

A special edition had been published, and an uninterested-looking newsboy was marching along with a poster which alarmed us both.

"My goodness, if there did happen to be a war just now, it would be very awkward," said I, awaking to this possibility for the first time.

"Yes, of course, if," agreed my husband, unhappily,

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and then, "but we had all this fuss last year and it came to nothing."

The argument seemed to lack conviction in face of that most alarming poster, and as we went home, I knew that we were both more than a trifle apprehensive.

My flat was in Chelsea and situated on the ground floor, for which I got a reduction in rent because I maintained that I did not like the thought of burglars. People have continually assured me since the Munich crisis that it is extremely lucky to be on the ground floor, though how it could be lucky to have ten storeys come crashing down on you to bury you alive, I fail to see. When it is merely the choice of being blown up by a bomb, or down by debris, I think that I would prefer to go up!

It was a pleasant summer's evening, following on a lovely day, and neither of us seemed to be very anxious to stay indoors.

"Let's," I suggested, "go over to Hampstead and see the Wyatt Tilbys after dinner. I am quite sure that he will be reassuring, and he always knows what is going to happen in the news world."

I have known the Wyatt Tilbys since the days of the original war, if that is how one can begin to think of it. I consider that the Boer War was the last gentlemanly one, though I have a friend (who wore a singularly unbecoming hat when he went off to Cape Town with the Volunteers) who would protest that he never found it a gentlemanly war at all! But from my own point of view, I feel that it was the last of the respectable wars, in which people who wanted to be soldiers did the fighting, and those who were peace-loving could stay at home without people being rude about it. And the fighters fought

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fairly cleanly, shot and shell and the old bayonet; no gas and liquid fire and tanks. After that the scientists got busy and invented appalling devices, completely spoiling the honest-to-goodness warfare for everybody.

The Tilbys lived in Frinton in the days when the Zepps meandered over the Essex coast in a rather solemn procession, and Mr. Tilby, being in the newspaper world, always seems to know things before they actually happen, so I felt that he would be the man to seek out at this very moment, when I was going all jittery, and I knew that Robbie was not too happy. On the face of it, it seemed to be a pleasant idea to take the car along to Hampstead, and to be reassured that, although there might be a repetition of last September's crisis, there certainly was not going to be an actual war.

The Tilbys were at home, and sitting listening to the news bulletin on their wireless.

"Is there going to be a crisis?" I asked.

"But there is one, isn't there?" said he.

This was hardly what I had come for, and it did not strike me as being in the least reassuring as I followed up the stairs to their sitting-room, where the news was actually being broadcast.

As we sat around listening to it, it occurred to me that I must have been deaf and blind to the recent trend of events. The crisis which I had flattered myself was still about a month ahead, was actually here on our doormats, it was in fact actually in the hall! My reproachful eyes met those of my husband.

Robbie retired from the Navy some few years ago and he was attached to the Foreign Office; it occurred to me that, even if I had been peculiarly short-sighted as to what was happening in the world in general,

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he could not have been. I had a vague idea that he must have been fostering my ignorance, on the principle that the longer I remained unaware of what was happening, the happier I should be; he was probably banking on the fact that it all might blow by as it had done last year, in which case I need never wake up to the danger at all.

I had suffered that same "turn in my tummy" for the major part of last September, and to no avail, which was maddening because it seemed to be such a waste. I became aware that Mr. Tilby definitely thought that there would be a war, and was of the opinion that as we had got to have it sometime or other, it was almost better to have it and get it over. Probably a sound idea, but hardly the one which I endorsed at this particular moment.

I became sorry that I had ever launched myself out on this expedition with the idea of bucking myself up. I had been far happier (if only I had known it) at lunch-time when I was picnicking among the horseflies!

Mournfully we returned to the car (known affectionately as 'Little Eke' because of her registration letters) and we started going home. The speakers were still holding forth in the park; London was hot and fetid, rather limp with the hot summer's evening, and it did not seem feasible that there could be a war when everybody was going about their daily tasks in the ordinary way. We went along the top drive towards Kensington, parallel with the Bayswater Road, where it is usually amusing to watch ladies of a very certain trade awaiting custom seated on small green chairs, and cocking hopeful eyes at passing possible clients.

• Nothing was amusing now.

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"You must have known," said I witheringly to my husband, when at last I could say something.

"Nobody knows," he remarked, I thought, evasively.

"But is there going to be a war?"

"Nobody knows," he repeated.

Really the Foreign Office must keep its officials sadly in the dark, or else they won't tell, which test of good sportsmanship always seems to me to be misplaced when it comes to important details like your wife and a war!

The next morning at breakfast he said that he had been thinking it over, and he considered I had better get away to the country for a bit. He put forth odd theories. A fuss was brewing up, petrol might be rationed, evacuation would be difficult and he would feel happier if I took myself off as it might be awkward for him to get me away later.

If there were a war, and he still persisted that we had got out of it last time so that he saw no reason why we should not get out of it this, the Foreign Office would almost certainly be moved, which meant that there was no point in my staying on in London, and I should only be a nuisance. He wanted me to go at once.

It was hardly what I had expected with the toast and marmalade. This time yesterday there had been no thought of a crisis being imminent, now we seemed to be standing on the brink of hostilities.

"What do I do?" I asked.

For the past year I had been making furtive plans as to what I would do if this happened. I had located pleasant little country hotels where unpleasant old ladies knitted impossible jumpers, and throaty old gentlemen with obnoxious coughs tootled about,

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but now, when it actually came to the moment here was Robbie ringing up a certain very comfortable hotel in the very much Western Midland district and I, with a quaking at my knees, and innumerable "buts" on my tongue, trying to stop him. He asked me to pack the luggage while he went to the office and suddenly I found peculiar plans had been made for him, and he had never breathed a word of them.

He must have a trunk of his own personal clothes in readiness, a suitcase for the night only, like a little boy going off to school, and a box of iron rations enough to last two days in case of emergencies. It was like a hateful dream, and I could not believe that it was really happening to me.

All the time London was going on exactly as usual, nobody save ourselves and the suave-mouthed gentleman who says sweet nothings from the B.B.C. seemed to have any idea that a war was close at hand. I kept on hoping that we had been grossly deceived, that the whole thing was not possible. Besides, Mr. Naylor said that there would not be anything of the sort, and his fellow-seers and what-nots were contemptuous at the thought of war. I remembered newspaper forecasts: THERE WILL BE NO WAR IN 1938. It surely could not be all nonsense?

"I'll take you down on Tuesday evening," said Robbie.

"But is it really necessary? Is not it a bit early as yet?"

"If we leave it too long it may be too late," I replied grimly.

I packed everything.

I found the little diary which I had kept during the Munich crisis and in one way it gave me heart because I realized I had been far windier then. The

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Gas masks had seemed to be difficult to get. at that time. I read the entry for September the 27th.

They worked digging the trenches in the park all night, and oh, what a night it was! They called for volunteers and were crowded out. Gas masks were fitted. I saw a little boy coming out from a fitting and saying, "But, Mummy, I want a big one. Why can't I have a big one?" to which she replied, "Because you have a very little face!" He said, "I don't care; I want a big one." The Recruiting office is going full bat, and labelled with posters "Join the Army and see the world." My bus conductor said, "Yes, see the world, and the next world too!"

The little boy was not the only one in difficulties over gas masks, because apparently I got anxious over Robbie. He had the greatest difficulty according to the entry a couple of days later.

Great trouble in fitting Robbie out with a gas mask. He has an instinctive dislike of them all on sight. The first too big, the assistance of retired Coldstreamer porter solicited. Porter changes for one of smaller type, whereupon R's eyes screwed up and sight impaired! Coldstreamer fetches yet another in which R. blows like a grampus, and declares he can breathe too easily. Argument finally settled, Coldstreamer given half a crown, departs. R. left with gas mask goes to his room, fiddles with it, and reappears with holes in the talc eyepiece, through which apparently he has put his nose! Sent to A.R.P. office in building, returning after very long time, with entirely new gas mask, which he declares leaks, but is otherwise quite satisfactory.

Finally I read the very heartening pages when everything blew over (as it surely might do again), and the amusing little stories of the crisis which then one had the heart to tell.

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The charwoman's husband was out digging trenches all night and a casual passer-by tackled him with "For air raids, mate?" She said he was so wild that he called back, "No, for celery!" which I was very amused by. She also told me that a man who had just returned from a 'bit of a bother in the police court' refused to have a gas mask, because he had been bound over to keep the peace for a year. She herself had been listening in to Hitler's bombastic speech and was most indignant about it, saying that it was a lot of bosh and, anyway, she couldn't understand a word of it.

That diary suddenly swerved from grave to gay. Maybe it will happen again, I told myself, and set to with my packing. Afterwards I'd laugh a lot about this (I hoped).

On the Tuesday we had a dismal tea together, and afterwards I said goodbye to the flat. The only thing that struck me really forcibly was the fact that it seemed a pity; only last week I had gone to the trouble of making fresh net curtains for my bedroom and now I might never want them. Although there was another year's lease to run, I might never cross the threshold again, and the very thought was fantastic.

But, after all, it was useless letting one's imagination run away with one. The whole thing might blow over, and then we could laugh at the idiocy of evacuation.

At the moment I did not feel like laughing.

I got into Little Eke with considerable sinking of the heart and sat down beside Robbie; we turned her bonnet towards Uxbridge. Maybe she would never come back again. If ever she did, I promised myself that I would give a cocktail party which would be a proper old drunk, and be blowed to the con-

sequences! I made a mental note of this resolve as we sped along High Street, Ken., with all the usual traffic in the lovely summer's evening.

"The first thing you'll have to do, my dear, is to learn to drive this car," said Robbie, "otherwise you may find yourself marooned."

I agreed but I did not relish the prospect, because I am not mechanically minded, and my previous efforts towards driving had not been attended by much success.

Life has been kind to me in that I possess a licence, and am the only member of our family (husband, self, and son) who has not been called upon to pass the test. Frankly I don't suppose that I could. I have seen the quaking learners gathered at the Tate Gallery waiting for this ordeal, and the most fierce-looking examiners waiting to set off with them, and their very faces would give me the jitters.

The story of my car-driving so far is a concise one. In 1922 I bought myself a decrepit second-hand Lagonda coupé, on the proceeds of a novel. In those days the law of the land allowed misguided young women to do that kind of thing with impunity, it had not woken up to the fact that the same misguided young women were nothing more or less than a public menace.

My brother taught me to drive in the happy-go-lucky way that brothers do, when they really have little interest in their sisters' activities. He taught me all that I ever learnt on the way to a dance at Harwich, and I did not take to it very well.

He said, "To start her, this goes in there, and that in the other; when you want to stop her, you jam on the brakes, which are these."

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I said in amazement, "Well, really I had thought that it was more complicated."

He replied, "Oh, bosh! Just look at the old fools who do drive cars," which I took to be encouraging, though rude.

I drove the Lagonda without ever using the gears, because I had no idea why they were there. It may seem impossible to my reader, but it has the merit of truth. I started in first, went up to third, and darned well stayed in third whatever happened, because the simple explanation was that I *had* to go in third, or stop!

The result of this strange principle of driving was that I had several rather unfortunate experiences, which reduced me to a state of nerves. The last fracas finished me for the time being, because I took a policeman in the back at Finsbury Park, and I had always felt that this put the R.I.P. on motoring for me. It was a pity, because I had fancied myself as a motorist, but I was just no good at it.

In the crisis of 1938, I had recognized the difficulty of being unable to get about the country by myself, and had galvanized all my efforts and started an intensive study of the art, which (seeing the fools who did drive) could surely not be so difficult as I thought. But the unfortunate fact still remained that I had very little idea of what to do with a car, and no notion at all of how to do it.

The difficulty about learning in London is that if you are nervous it is hard to find a secluded spot in which you may practise in peace. Ultimately I discovered Battersea Park. The park is, I believe, barred to L's, but I was not an L in the true spirit of the law, though L-ler than most if it came to it.

If, I thought to myself, I drive round the park

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four times a day, surely in six months I should have learnt a little about it?

Don't you believe it!

All through that Spring I drove solemnly round Battersea Park, learning absolutely nothing at all. My unfortunate husband sat beside me making occasional feeble protests and giving wise or unwise advice, which I regret to say I seldom acted upon. Once I went round entirely alone, and nearly collapsed when I met him by the boating lake again. It is true that on two occasions in an intrepid mood I did leap out into the Albert Bridge Road, once to become immediately entangled with a lorry from the paper mills, and the second time to confront a fire-engine in action, which was beginner's pure bad luck. These things inevitably happen to the fool!

In emergencies, I developed a distressing habit of stopping everything, and saying, "Robbie, I can't," and leaving it at that no matter where I was! How the man put up with it, Heaven only knows, but he really is the most patient of people.

Occasionally whenever we went out into the country I would take the wheel (under great protest) and after a few miles would, on encountering the first difficult situation, trot out my habitual, "Robbie, I can't!" and give up the ghost.

Like this, as you may suppose, I did not get very far.

Now, on this very unreal summer's evening, towards the end of August, I knew that I must make the effort and start driving in earnest. It was going to be dreadful.

We left London behind us and set out upon the country roads, and here there was no sign of war. Both of us could picture these same roads in a few

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days' time, when the evacuation began seriously, and it was not at all a happy picture. I don't think either of us enjoyed that drive too much.

We stopped at Aynho, one of the loveliest little villages that I know, and we sat down to a boiled egg supper, contemplating a new future. The inn at Aynho is a real country one, kept by the most kindly people, and sitting there in the pleasant parlour it seemed to be even more inconceivable that there could be a prospect of war. We must have dreamt the whole thing. The children were playing on the green outside, and laughing; there was the sound of the men in the bar, and the happy-go-lucky chatter of the pleasant fresh-faced waitress, who had no inkling of an emergency, with the hot coffee, the very new bread and butter and the eggs. Yet something must be afoot, it wasn't a dream, for here we were, with Little Eke packed full with a portable wireless, a couple of typewriters, the file cabinet, my dressing-case, and my best hat protruding out of the back. It seemed that we were being torn between the impossible and the possible, as hundreds of people were going to be torn within the next few days, only we happened to have started earlier than most, owing to priority of outlook.

Aynho was peaceful; you couldn't have believed that all this was really happening when you sat there looking out at it. The Salvation Army was the most military object to be seen in Banbury, and we turned Little Eke for Warwickshire and the village of Clare.

I do not propose to reveal where I eventually landed. The story that I am going to tell is the story of hundreds of little farms, and guest-houses, and inns dotted about England, and not of any

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individual one. It is the story of every evacuated woman of August, 1939.

Years ago for my first solid eighteen years of life I lived in the Midland neighbourhood, rode an elderly bicycle, intimidated fractious cows by the waving of a red tam-o'-shanter, played the harmonium on a Sunday, and district-visited most of the week for a clerical father.

Suffice it that, although I was not actually born amongst the Cotswolds, I arrived in their midst carried by my mother in a Japanese basket, weighing anything under ten pounds, and that I know them fairly intimately.

Warwickshire, Gloucestershire and Worcestershire abound in little stone and Tudor villages, which straggle on either side of wide streets with grass verges and pleasant trees. The hills are always blue, the villages are mostly damp. I have caught innumerable colds among them, and I shall go on catching colds there, because they are made that way. It was to Clare, a village in the vicinity of home, that I returned on this miserable evening.

We did not arrive until much later, with wreaths of white mist rising in the dips, and the sun long set. The village seemed to be most surprised to see me. We anchored up outside the only hotel, which was situated in the main street, and would be an inn anywhere else. It was matey and comfortable and nobody had given Hitler a second thought. 'Oiks' were quaffing beer in the bar, and the Office was agitating as to what they would do with the four kittens the old tabby cat had had, whilst everybody else seemed to be discussing Stratford-on-Avon mop, which was due in October, and would be a 'do.'

"There ain't going to be no war, leastways we

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haven't heard nothink of it here," said the haphazard porter, as he escorted me and my luggage upstairs, and by accident into the bedroom of an old lady who was undressing and who screamed.

This represented a roof.

We felt that very soon we might be one of a trail of evacuees, all laying claim to so much roof in just such a place. I felt very frightened.

II

I Learn to Drive the Car

THE next morning Robbie returned to London, promising to reappear the following night. He worked queer hours in shifts. One day from nine in the morning till tea-time, and the next day from tea-time till eleven at night, which meant that he could come down after office hours one evening, stay all night and the next morning, and return to London at lunch-time. Quite a satisfactory arrangement when you came to think it out.

Left alone in Clare, I decided that I had better start being a little more competent and I must learn to drive the car. It was the first lesson of the war (if war there was going to be; I still had a sneaking hope that all this was a bad dream) and I decided to tackle the proposition straight away.

I glanced inside my note-case, and saw the licence lying there safely, which should have given me some confidence but which actually gave me none at all. I knew my own lack of ability only too well.

I said to myself, "I'll take this car to the village and back, or die for it," and it very soon occurred to me that I might have to die for it !

My father's late parish of Whitchurch (he left in 1916, but it is still home to me) was some miles away, and although I believed that I had arrived at the stage when I could go along the open road serenely, the village was a dead end, and sooner or later I should have to turn round. This horrible fact impressed itself upon me. Although I had practised

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turning on one or two more or less unfortunate occasions, I was acutely conscious of my own lack of dexterity in this direction.

However, I started for Whitchurch very gallantly at about ten miles an hour, taking the short cuts that I knew of and where I was less likely to meet traffic, but the nearer that I came to the village the more my heart sank, and whereas at one moment I had planned that I would drive up the little lane and alight with a flourish on the front door-mats of rustic friends, I now came to the conclusion that I would merely sneak to the paddock gate and turn round there, if I could!

The paddock gate would be the best place for me to turn round because it was very lonely, and there I could take my own time without getting fussed. It is the getting flurried which complicates matters so badly and which I hate. So I made for the paddock gate. Then things began to happen.

En route, two country fowls ran across my bows and upset me very much. They were hysterical, but not more so than I was. The worst of the fowl is that it goes about with a haunted eye, and you have only to look into that eye to know that it expects the worst in life. In any emergency it has to tell you all about it; these two fowls squawked wildly and told me a bibful.

Arriving at the paddock gate, I halted and backed into the ditch. The car groaned, settled herself in the mud, and became quite indifferent to any further efforts on my part to make her start again.

I had chosen the paddock gate because I had thought that it was pleasantly lonely, but now I was ensconced here for the afternoon with no hope of soliciting aid from any passer-by, for the reason that

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nobody passes. The lane leads through four or five gates to the church in the fields, and on to our outer suburb called Crimscote, consisting of about six houses, a dovecot and little more; ultimately it winds its way to Talton Mill, which is no metropolis. People always go by the main road, because they don't like having to get out of their cars, or off their bicycles, to open gates. Nobody ever passes by the paddock gate if they can possibly help it.

It is true that I could have gone to my father's late rectory and solicited the aid of the Rector who drove a car himself, but I had no wish to call upon the cloth to assist me unless I jolly well had to. I'd get out of it somehow, said I, getting a great deal further into it in my ignorance. Now the horror of the war had sunk into the background, and I was only occupied with the major horror of being marooned by the paddock gate, perhaps for ever.

Eventually I pulled myself together, and found that in my panic I was not pulling the self-starter out far enough; I accelerated violently, forgetting that I had left her in reverse, and charged the paddock gate full blast like a battering-ram! There was no time to argue, or to see what damage I had done, I was only so scared that the car would stop on me again! I wheeled round, out of the mud, making the closer acquaintance of an enquiring thorn bush, and proceeded to hare up the lane on my return journey.

Now I did not care. I would stop for no man.

A cat slithered from under my bonnet; in the next village another one had a hair's breadth escape, and as I came leaping like a constipated kangaroo out of a side-turning, I almost charged Ivor Novello in a most handsome car.

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Not a bad bag for one day; two chickens, two cats and Ivor Novello! I could hardly expect more, surely?

On my return to Clare I was frightfully pleased with myself, which is usually a sign of something awful to come. I might have known that it was crazy to be in such a seventh heaven of delight, but in my own eyes I felt that I was doing very well with the car.

On enquiring into an A B C which I found in the hall of the hotel, I discovered that there was a most excellent train service running from London to Kemble (a mere thirty miles away) and that nothing could be easier than going over to meet Robbie there, and surprising him with my prowess. A very good idea, that, I thought. He would get down far quicker than if he came to Clare, so I wired suggesting this, adding with a flourish,

CAN MEET TRAIN.

It looked very grand, I thought.

Too late did I discover that Kemble meant driving through Cirencester, and this is one of those curly little places, not at all the best spot for the amateur; also the sense of humour of the local police has become acidulated by the young gentlemen who disport themselves at the Royal Agricultural College there, my own son amongst them at one time.

To my horror Robbie wired back accepting my over-generous offer, which meant that now there was nothing for it but to go! This was a dreadful shock, for my first ardour had cooled considerably. I received his telegram that he would meet me at Kemble, when I was trying to stave off the fatuous conversation of a ragged and simple-minded man who declared "it 'ud come to naithink, he 'ud be bound."

I Learn to Drive the Car

I had jolly well got to start, and straight away. I commended my soul to God, and got into Little Eke.

I met everything that I darned well could meet on that journey.

To begin with, when I got over the hills, which are high and bleak, a thunder-storm descended upon me. It wasn't your idea of a thunder-storm either; the heavens opened, the road became flooded in an instant, and the elements gave their version of what a first-class air raid would look like. Also I had no idea how to work the screen-wiper! I sat there with a window leaking, and the screen being peppered with raindrops like eggs, and the crashes of the damned going on whilst I fought with the knobs on the dashboard. I turned on the lights by accident, and found all manner of unexpected things which were maddening at this particular moment, and then by a miracle I got the screen-wiper going.

Thirty miles is a long way.

The next thing that happened was that I found the road up, which I had not expected. It was fitted with a horrifying little ramp. An old man in a sentry-box made peculiar passes with a red flag intended to waft me on to the ramp, but which might have meant anything in the world. At the far end a lout did strange tricks with a green flag, and an impatient lorryman called:

"Come on nah; what'yer waiting for?" to me.

I met the most unexpected traffic lights in the heart of the country, at a most inconvenient moment in the dip of a steep hill, and naturally I had not expected them. I dashed round all manner of hairpin bends knowing that I was losing time, and last, and by no means least, I approached Cirencester itself!

It was a ghastly moment.

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I put up a prayer, and went down into second, believing this to be the safest thing to do. I approached the round-about by the cinema (where my son was once sick into a fire-bucket) and "Now," thought I, "I am in for it!"

I was, too.

The market-place was dedicated to the attentions of the road menders. Innumerable gossipy country cousins seemed to have but one idea, and that suicide. A baker's cart ambled aimlessly, with myself getting closer and closer to its behind, and wondering what on earth I should do if it stopped. Mercifully it didn't.

I was scared stiff of the policeman, who seemed to notice nothing peculiar about me, and when I came to the end of the little town I felt like cheering.

I shot out of Cirencester and up past the old Coll., believing that at last I could drive the car. I'd got it taped! I'd suffered untold tortures, and yet I got Little Eke up to Kemble station more or less on time.

Overshooting my mark, I had to do a hundred yards in reverse, which wasn't quite so good. I almost accounted for an airman and a country girl whom I had failed to see; they must have emerged from some compromising position in a ditch.

Still, here I was!

I backed violently. I swept over the bridge and into Kemble station yard with the gravel flying, and Robbie standing there with his eyes popping out and a look of horror on his face. I shaved a Rolls Royce by an inch; the chauffeur may have supposed it to be judgment, but it was luck.

But still, here I was!

I'd learnt my first great lesson of the war, if war there was going to be.

III

I Move House

I SPENT four days in the village inn before I decided to move into a neighbouring guest-house which looked too good to be missed. It was very old, a stone house with mullioned windows and ingles and a quiet dignity of its own. In the garden there were only flowers of memory, marigolds and hollyhocks, dark red roses and heliotropes. There was something romantically old world about it. It was quiet with that very essence of peace which so belied all that was happening beyond the Cotswolds, and I decided that I would like to be here.

I doubt if I should ever have been able to get in, save that by now everyone seemed to have awakened to the fact that a positively desperate crisis was raging, and that war might really be. Whereas in the Munich crisis of last year everybody had gone crazy and had dashed out of the cities, swamping the country, now everybody seemed to be keen on only one thing. They wanted to get home.

Every road was a trail of cars returning hurriedly from interrupted holidays, so that I was able to move from the local inn immediately.

Most of my hand luggage I carted over personally, walking along with the typewriters and that infernal best hat which refused to go in anywhere (incidentally in the end I had to throw the thing away, because it looked positively freakish in rural surroundings), but I got everything moved save the big trunks, and these I got along in Little Eke later on. Ultimately I took

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her along and survived the initial test of getting her into one of the trickiest garages that I have yet to meet, then I went up to my room and started to write.

The room looked on to the bathroom, or almost, and everybody seemed to have baths at all times of the day and night, and most of them seemed to sing. It was not conducive to a congenial atmosphere.

At this particular juncture, with war actually on our heels, every editor in London was in a frenzy because he realized that although his stocks of MSS. might be full, they were full of quite the wrong material. These editors were in a flap. Anything might happen, and they expected their writers to foresee what it was likely to be and write about it. They did not know what they wanted, nor what their publics were going to want, but they knew that it must be something very different from the material they had in the office drawers.

So there was I, attached to the typewriter in a fever, with the earnest hope that I should achieve something good but doubting it very much, while the bathroom taps ran, and ran, and ran, and the maids who bathed in the afternoon sang "Nearer, my God to Thee," very appropriate music for the moment, or "South of the Border." These appeared to be the favourites. Reputable papers were already threatening to smash, new war ones were springing up; it was all happening on the moment, so that I hardly knew where I was, and I doubt if anybody else did.

The guest-house had disgorged its holiday-making residents and now new ones were arriving, most of them evacuees like myself. Women with little children, sent into the country by harassed husbands until they knew what was going to happen. A rather bashful retired Major with a less bashful wife, and a

Maltese lady who had only three words in her vocabulary. Gorgeous (accent on the gorge), Indescribable (accent on the bubble), and Marvellous (accent on the louse!)

Her conversation was like Niagara, and equally uninformative, and equally like Niagara she was inclined to splash. Now I have lived for different periods of time in Malta, and love it. I have very dear friends there, and never have I met a Maltese who could talk like Mrs. Tabona! In the beginning I made the mistake of being sorry for her, which gave her the opportunity to dig herself in tooth and claw, and too late I realized that whereas India can produce the untouchables, Malta can produce the inescapables!

I had got to adapt myself to an entirely different condition of living; I had got to go rural. Alas, I am not rural minded. I rebel horribly. The difficulty with the provinces is that they are entirely self-centred, and I think these people were annoyed that I was not impressed by them. Naturally I ought to have been. They suspected the imaginative mind as being something 'a little odd,' which is one of the liabilities for ever attached to the author, who must be queer to be an author at all.

They offered me the thing called 'copy.' The lay mind can never accustom itself to the thought that an author can find his own copy, and that his mind does not run along the lines of picking up other people's experiences, as a mendicant may accept old clothes. I foresaw that if I didn't look out, I was going to be tormented into being very rude indeed.

They had no idea of the heinousness of the offence of interruption. I had either got to be insulting, which would be unthinkable, or give up being an author, which would be worse!

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"What in the world do I do?" I asked myself in despair.

What with the bath-water which ran for ever, and the people who would sing, and the people who would splash, I thought I had got to change all my ideas.

I went to lunch with the B.B.C. at Evesham, whither they had been evacuated. I drove over myself, only to find that Evesham is impossible for the amateur. Mercifully I stopped short and persuaded a garage to take me in and let me walk the rest.

The B.B.C. were no longer ensconced in a shining white palace, façaded with odd effigies of strange proportion, but I traced them down to a dreadful little workman's hut at the station, marked B.B.C. in chalk letters not even of a uniform character. The town hall was a positive shambles of prone young men in truckle beds. I wandered amongst them enquiring if they knew where Val Gielgud was billeted, and met with the greatest difficulty.

The billeting arrangements had been carried out in complete secrecy, save from the broadcasts in Germany, who welcomed them to Evesham the very night that they arrived there. I had already heard from an Evesham family what they thought of the B.B.C. ("Very foony people, very foony indeed!"), and now I heard what the B.B.C. thought of Evesham, which was exactly the same thing with an Oxford accent.

Some unfortunates had been billeted with aspidistras and china swans, with cheap ornaments and overmantels, and landladies who thought of them as naughty boys and girls and believed that all actors and actresses must be immoral.

It was refreshing to be able to explain my own

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difficulties of being landed in the heart of the country with people who did not understand that writing is work. They could share my anguish. Throw a fit of temperament, was suggested. Scream. I would have done had I dared, but I knew that this might be a deadly failure, and would not achieve its end.

To the average man and woman, writing is only so easy; you can actually do it in your lap. They believe that you turn on "one of your dear little stories" as you turn on the hot tap for your bath; they think that you sell everything that you ever write, "which must be so easy for you, dear"; and that editors beg on their bended knees for the honour of publishing your work. They have no experience of the difficulties of getting an idea, or of the hard-heartedness of editors, or the frequency of rejection slips.

And the worst part of it all is that the people I was consorting with meant so well; they only wanted to be friends, and I wanted friendliness, but not in my working hours.

I debated on the bright idea of pinning a notice on the door, "If you have nothing to do, don't do it here," but thought perhaps it might be misinterpreted as being only the signpost to the lavatory.

There seemed to be no other way out.

The papers were hourly growing graver, and the B.B.C. news bulletins were given out in that same maddeningly bright voice, but the context of what was said indicated that war was only a matter of hours.

Every other night when Robbie got down, things seemed to have become worse, and yet we fostered high hopes, and the memory that we had got out of it last time and therefore might again, but under it there

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was this beastly feeling of apprehension that we really were up against it good and hearty!

Blackout curtains were now the great topic of conversation, and people were going forty and fifty miles to get hold of material for them. We were all enlisted to sew, and only too ready to give our services. There was a general stampede in the buying of drawing-pins; we searched all Warwickshire for them, bringing them back by the dozen boxes, and it struck me that this war was actually going to be fought with drawing-pins. Incidentally they are not at their most effective when they are employed on windows made of Cotswold stone.

. In the last war we used to make our curtains of heavy dark serge, of the pre-war quality which was never made after the end of 1914. We sewed them very full indeed, because that is the only way to get a really satisfactory result. This time everybody seemed to have the dotty idea of making them to fit. You attached rings at given points, and hitched these on to cup hooks, which, if there was too much strain, came out on you. The sides of the curtain curved and bulged and emitted the light and then gaps began to show and the local police-sergeant came round, protesting that wasn't the way to fix them. We sewed faithfully, and spiked ourselves with unwilling drawing-pins; we blacked out preparatory to the great upheaval, and all the time we went on praying hard that this dreadful thing might not happen.

The entire British Army appeared to be lumbering past the house, on its way to some unknown destination, and overhead every afternoon the sky became yellow with little practice planes from the aerodrome on the other side of the county. Some of them

wobbled very much, and quite often the church tower seemed to be in grave danger. Life was becoming more tense. It seemed to bring everything much nearer when we knew that they were going to evacuate the children out of the big cities; obviously they would not do this unless things had become really desperate.

The vanguard of the great little army arrived at eleven one night, and I have got to admit that it was one of the greatest sights that I shall ever see. The children marched out of the station yard into the village street, little mites hand in hand, dead tired, with big eyes in small white faces, but never a tear.

"My Mum says soldiers don't cry," said one little chap in a ragged coat, clutching at a gas mask. He was only four and worn out. It was pretty brave when you come to think of it, and it taught some of the grown-ups a lesson.

They must have been frightened.

Unfortunately the whole world harbours the insistent and entirely erroneous idea that all children love green fields and dote on rural life. This isn't true. The Cockney child very soon becomes homesick for its lamp standards and pavements. It pines for cinemas and fried fish shops. It finds the wide open spaces bleak and unsatisfactory, is afraid of the country animals (very often with good cause), and cannot understand a form of life when it is not able to spend its spare time in the cinema, or playing hopscotch on convenient pavement squares. Its roller-skating activities are limited because of the bumpiness of the roads, it finds life unpleasantly dark at night, and is led to believe that the owls are ghosts come to haunt it.

In my father's late parish another horde had appeared, led by a lady in pince-nez, who must have

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had an awful shock. There was no shop for five miles, and going to school meant a tour over the fields parallel with an interesting river which to my knowledge had drowned three of our children in the last twenty-five years. The children had a shock too; there wasn't a cinema, and there wasn't a pub, and one child went into hysterics because there was no beer for supper.

According to their lights they were offered the oddest food: They objected to village ablutions, and the village objected to the live stock they had brought in with them. It looked like an impasse.

Those who had arrived at Clare had been sent by parents who had put forethought into the packing of the little cases of luggage each child was supposed to carry. These cases had looked all right, but when opened revealed nothing of any use whatsoever, which meant that local ladies had to get active with their knitting-pins. A round robin was started, which meant that the children were equipped by charity, and you must admit that from their parents' point of view this was highly satisfactory.

One little girl was amazed to see a hen running about, remarking that she thought you could only buy "them things on butchers' slabs!"

The pond with the ducks was the first port of call, and very nearly provided a permanent port for those who floundered into it. Within a week our large family of Cockney children had learnt that all berries were not edible, that some cows are bulls, and that horses can bite as well as kick. What they taught the country children in exchange for these illuminating pieces of information, Heaven only knows!

We had had some experience of what a town child can teach its country cousin in my misguided youth

at Whitchurch. There was a charitable enterprise which sent "sun-starved little ones who have never seen a field" to us in the summer, and these children were parked at the cottages. They sounded very pathetic on paper, but when they arrived they taught our children the most unholy tricks. One charming little game was putting nails, business end up, in the road, covering them with dust, and then watching me bicycle over them with lamentable results from my point of view. The worst of this was that, although we got rid of the children, we never got rid of their tricks, which remained engraved on the hearts of the country cousins for ever and a day.

I started my war by buying a bicycle.

My activities with Little Eke were whole-hearted and I could go to most places, though I did not like Warwick or Evesham too well, and had had a signal failure in my one attempt to enter Cheltenham up a one-way street (the wrong way, you will understand), which left me a bit jittery. I found that the judicious expenditure of half a crown on any country park was sufficient to persuade the attendant to help me so efficiently that the police might almost have thought that I could drive.

But this state of ecstasy was not likely to continue, because I had found that the papers were warning people that in case of an emergency a petrol ration would be the first thing to appear. This struck horror to my heart. It was just my luck, to have learnt to drive the car and then to be pipped on the post by a petrol ration!

So I bought a bicycle.

To my surprise this initial step towards war conditions in my life was greeted as a huge joke by the people at the guest-house.

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"Incredibubble," said Mrs. Tabona, and went off into hoots of giggles.

We laughed a lot in that house. We laughed girlishly and maddeningly at nothing, so that sometimes the boys who paraded the streets in the dusk would stop outside and say "Naw then!" through the windows. But we still went on with our imbecile laughter.

I bought a handsome bicycle for fifty shillings, and rode it with gusto. It had an unfathomable three-speed gear, and was of the serviceable variety.

This was the beginning of my war.

IV

It is War!

DURING the week before the war actually began, a most mysterious arrangement of white lines had begun to split every lane in England. I could not think what on earth it was for, and being inexperienced as I was in driving Little Eke, I had found the greatest difficulty in steering between the behinds of painters so feverishly engaged and the on-coming traffic.

It was not only in this that they added to the general complication of driving, because now I did not know where and how I could park. When I had started skimming about on my own, Robbie had given me the most stringent directions as regarded white lines, which he told me might lead to my undoing; you could not park inside these lines because it was against the law.

The last thing that I wanted to do in my present state of inefficiency was to attract the attention of some enquiring policeman, which would have given me the jimjams, but now suddenly everything changed, and literally there was nowhere left which was not inside white lines. All the old rules had suddenly gone by the board, which I found most confusing.

Everybody at the guest-house wanted to do something in the way of national service, save myself. My one idea was to sit tight and do nothing for the time being. In 1914 far too many people rushed their necks into nooses and were sorry for it afterwards. Everything was becoming harrowing. Virile

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young men were being called up from the harvest fields, and I saw them come into the road actually with their sickles in their hands. Women went about crying, the helplessly pathetic crying which no words help very much. A mysterious couple of guns had suddenly entrenched themselves overnight in a field which had looked to be entirely pacifist until now. Young men went about in caps and armlets over their ordinary jackets, which looked queer, but apparently the uniform was not to be got at the moment.

There did not seem to be any national work that the enquirers could do, for although the newspapers were making a song and dance about the need for people to help with the harvest, farmers were very scathing when you applied and suggested that you would be willing to help.

It struck me at this particular juncture that the powers-that-be had got their plans for this war set with the greatest care and precision. In 1914 everything was rush and fluster, and a general post, which resulted in chaos. It was not going to be like that this time.

After the children had arrived there was no further influx of evacuees, everybody else seemed to have taken themselves off home, wherever home might be, and however dangerous. The major war problems seemed to be the blackout and the curtains that did not fit.

There were constant chats of the less friendly nature with the police-sergeant, who had the most amazing moustache that I have ever seen, waxed fiercely, as in pre-war days in faithful imitation of Kaiser Bill, and sticking out to right and left of him like cats' whiskers, which I am told they use for 'seeing' with in the dark.

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This seems to be a queer provision of nature. I almost wondered if he used his the same way. Some-time later one of the officers billeted with us said that he had had cause to see the police-sergeant washing his face, and I could not imagine what a frightful sight it was when he washed this skilfully waxed moustache, and it drooped. It was, said the officer, a case of how are the mighty fallen, how are the proud cast down!

I realized that I was probably on to the last few weeks of driving the car perhaps for some time, and therefore I made the most of it. The army was on the road; it bought up a good deal of space and I had many trying moments with it. Military young men could not see very well into the dimness of my saloon car and under my large hat, therefore I suppose that they did not realize that I was the age I am. I had my successes, which thrilled me as in the 1914 days, when I was of the age that deserved them.

Rounding one corner and dashing down a hill, I saw a gun-carriage approaching me down the opposite hill, and suddenly realized that its gun had come unhitched. The gun was careering along at a ghastly speed and all over the road! What a thing for a novice to meet! A corporal held up his hands to stop me, and I fled, car and all, into the hedge, but it gave me a dreadful turn.

The village had given up worrying about the war, because they were far more worried with the evacuated children.

"Very foony children," said they.

The main trouble seemed to be over the food. The town child has its own idea of diet; most of its meals are bought ready cooked, and the major meals are eaten out of a piece of newspaper. I see it at my

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flat in London, which although a most aristocratic block with everything provided that the fastidious heart can desire, veers on to 'buildings,' and is conveniently flanked by a fried fish shop, treated as a restaurant by the small children of the neighbourhood.

These children understand rissoles and saveloys and ice-cream cornets, but were amazed at meat and pudding meals, and at first highly suspicious of them. They were unused to being gathered up to the kitchen table and served with vegetables, and they became rude and argumentative. I knew that this phase would pass. The royal road to any child's heart is through its stomach, and the village would win because they were good cooks and had excellent methods of feeding people.

I was proved to be right, for although for the first week the children sulked over the food provided, there came a very definite turn in the tide which personally I should think will lead to a dickens of a lot of trouble when there is a peace day (if ever). These children took to the village meals and the vegetables which tasted 'ever so different,' and the ginger pudding and apple pie, which were like nothing they had had before. But what will happen when they have to be returned to the parents they have forgotten? And the meals they won't understand so well? Some of them may not want to go; some of their foster-mothers may not want to part with them.

Sufficient to the day is the evil thereof, which is a good maxim to work on during a war anyway.

I went from cottage to cottage and sat in the little kitchens which are so essentially English and so spotlessly clean, and listened to the stories of homely folk in a quandary. What went on outside the village was nothing like so important as the diffi-

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culties inside it. They did not know what to make of children who spoke of the ford as the paddling pool, and the green as the recreation ground, and denied that milk could be got out of a cow, which was dirty, and maintained that the only milk worth drinking came out of a bottle, which was the way they got theirs.

"Well, 't isn't the same sort of milk," said one little boy slightly.

A staunch farm labourer "durned him if it were the same milk because it 'ud be skim!"

Towards the end of this portentous week, it became more and more apparent that the hopes of peace were narrowing. Robbie tried to assure me that there was still a chance, but even the seers in the papers had got windy, and whereas they had howled "There won't be a war in 1939," so that everybody had believed them and quoted them, now they adopted a different attitude, which was unnerving. It appeared that there was one inauspicious star which had been overlooked, one obnoxious little star which, allying itself with a new constellation, was definitely menacing. They havered with a good deal of uncertainty.

This little star was ostensibly Hitler.

I tried to forget that the crisis must be nearing its end. I had been scared by the Russian alliance, even though the village idiot ambling along on one of my dismal walks assured me it didn't mean as much as some folks thought. I tried to concentrate on my new surroundings, on the people with whom I was mingling, but it wasn't easy.

Mr. and Mrs. Temple kept the guest-house, and they kept it very well, though I thought it a somewhat moot point if it would keep them very long. It might

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be commandeered, the most wild commandeering was going on in all sorts of apparently aimless directions, and it seemed highly possible that the authorities might turn their attentions our way.

The Temples came from Somerset; they had those usual kind hearts of West Country people. They knew a great deal. That is the trouble with country folk; they always know a great deal and most unfortunately they know it very much. They have a passion for absorbing academic information, and taking it extremely seriously, reissuing it in large portions per head.

The most annoying part is that you cannot catch them out at it. They have the most rapacious appetite for the improvement of the mind, and apparently go on at it until they grow senile and past improvement. My mother had a Somerset friend of the same type as the Temples, and when last I saw her, even though she was a good sixty, she was still improving her mind hard. Every night when we went to bed, she would produce a serious book and take it with her, doing an hour's intensive reading and feeling most virtuous about it. It seemed lamentable that she should still stand in need of so much improvement.

Mrs. Temple was getting on in life, and Mr. was oldish and settled in his ways. They had run a guest-house in Minehead, and had given it up to come to the Cotswolds ten years ago, and the Cotswolds had been kind to them.

She fed you admirably, and the place was very comfortable indeed, that is to say as comfortable as any place could be in the present circumstances, with the horror that at any moment one-half of Europe would start blowing the other half to perdition, and

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we might be all dead or maimed for the rest of our days. The whole of the future seemed to have lost itself in a maelstrom of uncertainty, and it was impossible not to feel quaky about it.

The next mainstay of our community was the Maltese lady, Mrs. Tabona. She always had a story to cap everybody else's, and no sense of modesty as to her own talents, or worldly possessions. She was a fine-looking woman, but she had none of the usual Maltese qualities, because she was neither languorous nor gentle. And what a talker!

She had a friend called Mrs. Wheat (pronounced Mrs. Veet), and who had gone everywhere and had done everything and apparently everyone. She simply could not shut up about her. They dined at the best hotels together, because only the best hotels were worth visiting. The Ritz palpitated when they went there; the Berkeley put their visits only next to those of minor royalties. There seemed to be a slogan "Only the élite for Mrs. Veet," and Mrs. Tabona too, naturally.

Mrs. Tabona was bad enough, but I thought it highly probable that Mrs. Veet might arrive, and then I should definitely have to move, because whereas Mrs. Tabona was a Niagara of conversation, Mrs. Veet seemed to be a Victoria Falls, and I could see what that was going to be like. At first in my loneliness, I had been glad of a chat, but it got past chat, veering round to a monologue on the letter I. And it was conducted entirely by Mrs. Tabona.

Mercifully it was very good weather, the best of the whole dud year, which meant that I got out and about a good deal, and could therefore avoid the community, but there were the evenings, and even

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on the first of September the evenings were getting to be a menace.

There was a dear old lady with kind, wise eyes, whom I liked enormously. But she seemed to find the evenings difficult too, and kept her room a good deal. There was the Major who weighed a lot, and ate a lot; they had been evacuated for a fortnight, and his wife was having that first trouble with her hair parting, which can be such a bogey in a girl's life.

Hairdressing was going to be a difficult problem for those of us who had gone rural.

They were all very nice people, and the main trouble was that I am not a nice person. The fact that I have to maroon myself with my typewriter for several hours a day gives the lay mind the idea that I am upstage and have gone grand. They think that I don't want to mix. This is quite wrong, because I like mixing, but in my own good time. They all want me to put them into a book, and when I do they don't like it. It is distinctly awkward. If omitted they are slighted, if included they are insulted.

There is no satisfying some people.

It was the end of the week. Saturday night we listened to the wireless and knew that now indeed we were actually on the threshold. If the miracle were going to happen it had better be quick about it. I woke next morning and stared out at the bright day with the blue sky, and the swallows practising, and the scent of the roses from the garden below coming in at my open window in drifts. It can't be war, I told myself.

But it was war.

V

Declaration of War

IT was the fateful Sunday morning, and having finished my breakfast, I came up to my room and did some work, and then settled down to listen to the radio at eleven o'clock. We had all known what it would be, and somehow I could not have sat in the main sitting-room with Mrs. Tabona saying "Ah," and "Oh," and "Vat did I tell you?" to everything. This was an announcement with which I wished to be alone.

I was alone.

I don't know why, but all along I had thought that when this actual moment came it would be very different. In the Munich crisis everybody had had the jitters; now there was a new confidence about England. I think we were all so sick of bluff, of bragging and bravado, that we were actually relieved to think that at last we knew the worst.

I could not believe that I should have taken it so calmly, but it was as though months of tension had suddenly snapped, and now I knew where I was.

Outside the mullioned window, the sunshine fell on the mulberry tree, "The oldest in the neighbourhood," someone said. They are all the oldest in that neighbourhood. There is a moth-eaten specimen in the New Place Gardens at Stratford-on-Avon, which is the niece of the tree from which Shakespeare pinched his mulberries, or so they say. Ours was the aunt. It makes for complications when you have to go into the collateral distinctions of mulberry trees.

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Out in the garden somebody was singing to a baby, and overhead there was a yellow aeroplane wheeling. Hundreds of young men would be going about in yellow 'planes very shortly, and getting their wings. Everything was going to change. Everything in this world, yet for the moment nothing had changed at all.

Only Mr. Chamberlain's voice had died down on my wireless, the National Anthem was sung and finished with, and I was wondering whether it would be years before the armistice came. Nowadays when wars start you never know when or how they are going to end. Everybody would probably be in it before it finished. Also I wasn't so sure that we should win it, but then of course this was high treason and incidentally I knew nothing about it.

In 1914 we had been glad to go to war. I heard the news sound after midnight when I stepped off the train at St. Albans, having finished playing the piano for the evening show at Harpenden cinema. To-day I heard the declaration in a bedroom filled with sunshine, and looking out on to a peaceful garden. The church bells had only just stopped ringing. We had started on a new trail. God alone knew where that trail would lead us.

For the past three days Robbie had been on all-night duty at the office, and I was to meet his train at Clare station at midday.

I got the car out of the garage and, armed with my gas mask, went off up to the station. I should probably have been bombed before I got back, I told myself, because I did not suppose that Hitler would stay his hand for a moment.

At the station a friendly porter with nothing much to do came out to paint white corners on the porch, and he told me that the train would be an hour late.

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We had a pleasant chat, because it was the most amiable station in England, but somehow it seemed to be all wrong for the war to have begun, London probably being blown to bits, whilst I sat here discussing the dahlias and the late roses, and the funny fancies of the station-master at Oxford. I could not believe that we were at war, really at war at last.

Eventually the train came in and Robbie appeared looking deadly tired, his face white and drawn.

"Well, that's that," said he; "I shall have some lunch and go straight to bed. Wake me up if there is an air raid."

I had not expected to be alive so long after war was declared, and I think he had thought something frightful would happen. He was thoroughly pessimistic, probably through over-tiredness, and general misery that everyone had worked so hard in the office to keep the peace, but that it had all been disrupted by that horrid little beast Hitler.

Robbie hurried through his lunch and then slept all the afternoon, whilst the people in the garden played croquet and sang to the baby, and presently the bells rang for evening service, and the little Aberdeen over the way, who could not stand the sound of those bells, sat down and had a good howl in the road. It was all exactly as usual, and it was quite wrong that it should be exactly as usual.

Later, when Robbie woke up, we went for a walk over the quiet fields. By grim irony it was a most beautiful evening, and it did not seem that there could possibly be war on such a lovely world. We felt apprehensive about going too far from the guest-house, and I noticed that everybody kept on looking up at the sky, as though they thought at any moment it might let loose Hell's own inferno.

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That night the blackout curtains went up with more pomp and ceremony than before (we were almost sure to be blown to bits by the morning), and I put out my coat by my gas mask, and my knitting, because I felt quite sure that Hitler could only be waiting for the cover of darkness, and something was certain to happen before I got up again.

But we had the most peaceful night!

Most of us were surprised to wake up alive, and just as I was in the middle of dressing at eight, the air-raid alarm went. Robbie was in his bath, which is rather a solemn ritual like a high mass, and takes a solid three-quarters of an hour, wet or fine.

Mrs. Temple came rushing up to call us, and Robbie came out very angry indeed, and looking rather pink from the hot water; then of course he didn't know where he had put his gas mask. I insisted on making my face up, even though it might be for my laying out.

"Surely," said he very grandly indeed, "you don't put your appearance before your life? How like a woman!"

"I must find my knitting," I said; "I'm not going to sit all through an air raid with nothing to do."

"Good God!" said Robbie.

I maintain that I always had my knitting in the last war, and anyway it was his first air raid and my umpteenth. I had a baby in one of them, and that is something that he has never done. I'm one up on him there. When it comes to air raids, I am used to the technique.

We trooped downstairs into the main sitting-room, which had been selected as suitable, though Heaven knows why. We had debated on this several times during the last week, and some bright light had suggested that if the blackout curtains were drawn

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in an air raid, that would prevent the windows from being blown in!

It was quite uneventful.

Mrs. Tabona had her hair in curlers under a net, and the Major looked more formidable undressed than dressed. His wife was very distressed indeed, and I felt that she would probably burst into tears with the first bomb. I need not have worried. Eventually a little boy came along saying that it was all a mistake, because the siren had gone off by accident, and would we please pay no attention because it didn't mean anything at all!

It was rather hard lines on those of us who had been so brave and had done our best to keep other people's peckers up, and all for nothing!

After breakfast we thought that we were being very brave to go over to Whitchurch in the car. They had had their air-raid warning also, because the policeman from the adjacent village had gone by on his bicycle, ringing his bell as had been previously arranged. It seemed that this policeman was to act as a portable siren. He had to do three villages by these simple means, so that if there really had been a lightning air raid, goodness only knows what would have happened to the second couple of villages. His appearance at this unexpected hour in my father's late parish seemed to have caused a stir. Opinions were divided between the stalwarts, who thought that "it weren't nothink" (and turned out to be maddeningly correct), and the others who immediately threw fits.

It was hard on the village anyway.

They had no shelters because it was a remote possibility that they would ever be attacked; they were far too close to the centre of England, and there

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was nothing to attack them for. All the same you have got to remember that human nature being much the same, whether it is in the centre of England or in the centre of Timbuctoo, the village were windy, and having nowhere to go made it all the worse for them.

The complete number of their gas masks had not yet been served out, and the warden kept his at the pub. a couple of miles away. Regulations, if you please! It seemed to me that at the first call of the siren, he would have an admirable chance to hop over the fields to fetch his gas mask, and then have a pint to put courage into the old heart! Again, human nature being what it is!

The hands of the A.R.P. authorities were full with the towns and the vulnerable points; they had not time to waste on isolated little villages, the moment was too serious.

Everywhere police stations and local county council offices were being sandbagged. They were the people who were determined not to be hurt, come what would. They seemed to have made a corner in sand. In Clare there was a cartload of it deposited at the side of the road, and the men filled sacks there and it delighted the little evacuated children, who played at seashores with it, bringing out buckets and spades and believing that was the real idea of the whole thing.

On the Monday afternoon Robbie had to go back to town, if there were a London left. That was an awful parting. I thought to myself that I should never see him again. Because nothing had happened yesterday meant that it was all the more likely to happen to-day. I tried to be brave and not to let him know how dreadful I felt, but it was a poor effort.

I was actually surprised when he rang me up at

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eight that night to say that he was still alive. Nothing had happened in London, positively nothing at all! There had been a false alarm and people had gone into air-raid shelters, but the all-clear had come, and nothing had been effected. We had been so busy prophesying an aerial offensive on London, spires toppling, domes bursting, gasometers exploding, and after all of this there had been nothing.

The balloon barrage had gone up a good deal higher, more sandbags had appeared, but the war had gone over to Poland, and in London everything was merry and bright.

It couldn't last of course, because this war was not for fun, it was in deadly earnest.

I returned from telephoning, back to the main sitting-room, where everybody was listening to the most infernal chamber music, which seemed to be a hobby of theirs.

"Well?" they said.

"It's all quiet in London," I told them.

"But it can't be?"

But it was!

What was more, it stayed like it.

VI

Petrol Ration

THAT chamber music was awful. It may be my perverted mind, but I prefer a tune. Now have at me! Mrs. Tabona was very musical. She liked nothing but the best, and I disliked the best heartily. She writhed at the mention of poor old Sandy Macpherson, she had never heard of Band Wagon, or Lucky Dip, and she thought light music was merely odious. She kept on saying so. The result of this was that she insisted on turning off anything that anybody else might have wanted, and we had to sit listening to this dreadful chamber music, because Mrs. Tabona appeared to be commanding officer of the wireless, and it seemed to me that she intended in the end to be C.O. of everything else in the house.

When the news came through, and everybody waited on it with bated breath, she kept up a running commentary of "Pah!" "Incredibubble!" "Oh, do you hear that?" "How marvelLOUSE!" until you could have kicked her. I must be a very pugilistic person, for there were moments when I longed to do her a physical injury.

I did not care to sit in my bedroom every evening, listening to the bath taps and the singing, and I wanted to bring down manuscripts to correct. It wasn't easy. Mrs. Tabona had so much to tell me. I had the dickens of a lot that I could have told her, but I remembered that I was an evacuee, and here on sufferance, and must hold my peace. But,

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thought I, one of these days I shall let myself go, and then I shall be kicked out into the street, because once I begin I shall never be able to stop.

I used sometimes to dream that the war was over and I had gone downstairs, and had turned on Arthur Askey and had said to Mrs. Tabona: "You put that in your pipe and smoke it, and if you dare to turn it off, I'll wring your neck for you."

I tell you, I'm not a nice person.

We sewed, and we sewed yards. We knitted, and we knitted pounds. We listened to the most awful dirges on that wireless, and I for one yearned for Tommy Handley and Ronald Frankau with the whole of my vulgar little soul! But it wasn't any good. Not with Mrs. Tabona in command.

Then worse happened.

The local doctor, who had time on his hands and had dropped in one evening, breathed of a secret hobby of his, and promised us all a treat. He had a cinema in the home. I think it was too much of a temptation for him seeing us all clustered there with nothing on earth to do, and he had decided that he could not keep off it. One evening we were told that he was rigging up his home cinema in the dining-room after dinner, and wouldn't we like to see his pictures?

When I first heard of this I could not believe my ears. It seemed impossible that we could be in for an entertainment of this nature, which all goes to show how abysmally ignorant I had become of what goes on in the country.

I had believed that I had left such very amateur cinemas along with the magic lantern in the village in the days of my extreme and far-away youth. Then I had liked that kind of thing very much. We had visits from the Church Army, which used to

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come round once a year to give the church a bit of a boost. Naturally they did not call it that, but it was what it boiled down to in common or garden English.

They would park themselves on the green, where they held mass meetings to convert the poachers, and sold little texts on vellum. I know I had a very valuable one, with a couple of forget-me-nots and a moss rose-bud, tied by a tinsel tassel, which I treasured for years. The Church Army gave magic-lantern lectures in a barn, a very similar kind of amusement.

There was one very popular lantern lecture called "The Torn Bible." I remember it even now. It was all about a young soldier given a Bible by his mamma, and getting it shot through, in some most peculiar war, when he waded through swamps, and struck tornadoes, and yet got wrecked on an iceberg. I didn't understand it at all, and, anyway, "Shot in the Bible and not in the heart" would have been a better title for it, for in the end there he was, on the threshold of the old home again (roses round the door), and Mamma, in a black bonnet, tottering out with a "Bless you, my boy."

This went down very well in the village and with myself, who thought it very touching, and the Church Army visitation offered us a delightful change from a dull existence.

But all that seemed to be a very long time ago, and I had no idea that there were general practitioners who cherished home-made cinemas as a hobby, and brought them out and showed you the pictures and thought that they were giving you a kick by it.

I had not expected this form of diversion in our dining-room.

"It may be amusing," said the Major, "and I

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always say a change is worth while. I'll try anything once."

"But such awful home-made films!" sighed Mrs. Tabona.

I had no illusions about it, and was wondering if I could possibly find a reasonable excuse for myself without hurting anybody's feelings too much. The doctor was quite a nice man, scholastically minded, rather sanctimonious, but meaning very well. Naturally he thought that my work was nothing like as important as his cinematograph show, so a little later in the evening I found myself sitting in the darkened dining-room with the other occupants of the guest-house, and wondering How long, Q Lord, how long?

It was a good deal longer than a discerning Lord need have allowed.

There was a large number of films of his home-life to be shown, because the doctor warmed to his work, and he always waited for us to say "How sweet!" or "Isn't that a nice one?" after each. It became a formula.

All save myself, and I said nothing, because I couldn't. If I had said what I felt, it would have been blasphemy, and I wasn't going to say what I didn't feel.

I have come to the conclusion that I am not a nice woman. I was a loathsome evacuee, but if there was going to be more of this spotted and blurred film business, I'd go barmy! The doctor must not be encouraged to do this on us, if we received him frigidly he might realize that he wasn't wanted. But unfortunately he was so engrossed in the beauty of his subjects that I think he forgot to notice our attitude at all.

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The set of films was painfully informative. I coveries among belfries and Norman towers, a walk blossom time on Bredon, Tewkesbury in a bit of a mist, and one, very long film that we didn't quite understand, but we said, "Isn't that a nice one?" just the same. He was vastly encouraged, and said that he had some excellent films of his hospital work in 1927, no doubt we would like to see these some other time? Some idiot said that we would!

When it was over, everybody hovered round the doctor and helped him put the projector back into his bag with the horrid idea that he would repeat the entertainment, and I think that he believed that he had been a wild success. It was a great mistake, I felt, and as soon as ever I could I went up to bed, feeling rattled over a wasted evening.

It was difficult enough to concentrate in the country entirely cut off from the stimulation of friends and intelligent conversation (though perhaps this was uncomplimentary to the people around me, all of whom were only too willing to instruct me on any given point), but to be landed with a local doctor who had a cinema outfit as well was more than I could bear.

But what on earth could I do?

The newspapers were depressing, and it was obvious that petrol was shortly to be rationed, which meant that my wings were going to be clipped. I had had a very pleasant time scootling about the country in the car. I had even got as far as approaching Stratford-on-Avon, and flying round a couple of roundabouts, at first with some trepidation, but finally quite efficiently. I had solicited the aid of the park attendant in Bridge Street, who seemed to be most

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understanding of my difficulties and said that it did not matter whom I hit, because he wouldn't say anything. Robbie thought this was all very fine, but what about his car? I had to admit that I had not thought of that.

I was still having regrettable moments; there was one nasty interlude with a tree in the Clopton Lane, during which I discovered that if you back out of an alley, it does not always follow that your front wheels pursue the same direction as the back ones, which seems a queer arrangement of nature to me!

In filling up at a petrol pump I became woefully entangled with a cigarette machine, which seemed to like me so much that it simply would not let go of my bonnet. Apparently while I was labouring under the delusion that I was in reverse, I was in reality nothing of the sort.

After that it became a routine for the boy at the garage to say whenever I stopped: "Now what about your gears?" I think he had a sick sensation that I might ram him in error.

Eventually it appeared that the petrol ration would entitle me to only six gallons a month for Little Eke, and that would not take me very far. To be evacuated is bad enough; to be evacuated with only a bicycle, and a car perforce put by for the winter, is a morbid thought. So far I had to admit that barring being cut off from my friends, losing a lot of work, and being lonely, the war had not hit me really hard. I had had almost a pleasant time. But all this was to end when the rationing started.

So I decided to be clever.

It was one Sunday morning that the local looney had a chat with me, which entailed a further chat with the garage, during which I discovered that if only

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I could supply them with a tin, I could have six gallons to put by me. I thought I had better get this whilst I had the chance, Lord's day or no Lord's day, so I rootled out the gardener, who was sitting at home having a quiet morning with the *News of the World*, and he supplied me with an old paraffin tin. Having got this, escorted it to the garage and returned with it full, my next agony was as to where I could keep it. If a bomb dropped on the guest-house, it seemed possible that my petrol might add to the excitement, which was not so good, though I daresay in the hubbub nobody would have noticed it very much.

Eventually my store was interred in the tool shed, as being a suitable spot, and I got two more gallons in a natty little can, which I secreted in the garage.

"I suppose you know that you are liable to imprisonment for that?" said Robbie.

I hadn't known.

I had believed that until rationing came into force I was entitled to buy a little and store it away, and now my cleverness faded into complete horror. In the last war, I bought three seven-pound pots of marmalade (with the optimistic idea that this would last until the war was over). I carried them myself all the way from Chequer Street, St. Albans, to the far end of the Hatfield Road, after which I suffered agonies, for I believed that I was guilty of food hoarding.

I seemed doomed to suffer these agonies at the beginning of any war. Marmalade 1914, petrol 1939.

"Oh, I expect you'll be all right," said Robbie, dismissing it airily.

On the day when the actual rationing was to start

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at midnight, I went for a big drive round to give myself a treat, feeling that it would be my last for many years.

It nearly was my last, though not in the way that I had anticipated, because I had a trying experience with a hay cart where no man would have expected it, and not only the hay cart, but a perverse steam plough coming out of a farm-gate for no known reason. I don't believe people who are veteran drivers meet all these odd vehicles on the road. But I had evacuated myself into a land which was alive with agricultural implements of a vicious nature, and when it wasn't agriculture, it was the Army on the loose.

I returned from my final treat at dusk, determined now to get the tank filled to the brim, ready for the awful day which would begin at midnight. The garage which I dealt with held up its hands in horror when they saw me. Their tanks were dry. Everybody had had the same idea of starting the rationing on a full tank.

What was even worse, no other garage in the place had a single spot left. I went back to the guest-house in complete misery. This was a ghastly dilemma, and I did not know what Robbie would say when he knew about it. He had impressed on me that I must get it filled up and start replete, and I had an almost empty tank.

Just as I got to the gate, the village looney ambled along with a rabbit dangling out of one pocket and a bunch of carrots under his arm. He did promiscuous market gardening, I gathered, and had oddments for sale. He smiled amiably and enquired if I were "Purting my car oop?"

I was bursting with fury and defeat, and had to tell

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somebody my tale of woe, so out it came. He said that he knew where there was some petrol to be got, and went into long rambling directions. I think his idea was to escort me, but although I could have tolerated him, I did not like the look of the much mangled rabbit dangling out of his pocket.

"There be a garage about four mile² up the Oxford Road," said he, "but it be getting a bit dark."

Dark to blazes! thought I.

There was now nothing for it but to make a dash for that petrol, and be blowed to the consequences, and off I went. I think that the boy at the garage would have had a fit. Only this morning he had asked me how long I had been driving, and when I told him three weeks with gears, some months without, he had seemed to be considerably surprised, and I gathered formed the conclusion that I suffered from some form of dementia.

I realized that now the blackout might be my major difficulty, because I had never contemplated driving after lighting-up time, with the result that nothing had been done to dim my lamps. When the war started, people had done funny things with newspaper to their headlights. Traffic signals had been reduced to little crosses, defying detection in places like Piccadilly Circus; tail lamps had been tied up in parcels. I had my lamps as God, or rather the Standard works at Park Royal, had made them, and anyway I had no idea which switch switched what on! Dark or no dark, I would jolly well have to go as I was!

I made up my mind that even if I died for it, I would have to make that garage which had the petrol left, whatever happened. I wasn't going to be left with nothing to do but hobnob with Mrs. Tabona and the

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doctor's cinema if I could help it. Not to mention the chamber music.

Evacuated children scuttled for safety (incidentally they were far nippier than their country cousins), and off I went. It seemed to be a very long four miles, and I kept on wondering if I were not squandering good petrol after bad. The papers had printed warnings that the faster you went the more juice you mopped up! I knew too little about it to realize if this were just a stunt or not, but anyway here I was, streaking along the Oxford Road at fifty, with night coming over the hills and no masked headlamps. It would be quite dreadful if that looney had wilfully misled me.

I hope I'll recognize the garage when I see it, I thought, but as it happened there was no chance of missing it. I had apparently not been the only one whom he had told, because half the world seemed to be anchored up outside it. Everybody had heard the buzz! Cars and motor bicycles from miles around were queuing up, and there were people with buckets, and people with tins, and people with all manner of utensils, some of which I should have thought were hardly suitable for petrol. They made no pretence as to not storing it. Surely it could not be such a very penal offence if half the country were allowed to fill up everything they had got in this manner? When I saw the queue my heart fell, and I wondered if I should ever get the chance of a drop.

"The pump's running dry," said the man three cars ahead. He thought it a great joke, but I realized that it would be awful to be pipped on the post.

"Oh please," I begged. Nature has provided me with a suitably pathetic face. I can look like a lost soul. I looked it then, what was more I felt it.

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Without any petrol I should be completely dished, and look what I had wasted coming here at that speed!

"We'll see what's left."

There was some left and I got it.

I scuttled home, I put the car to bed, ramming a tub of geraniums in the effort and not caring a hoot. I'd done well and it had been worth it. After all, Robbie would think that I had been very clever, because after the most dreadful difficulties I had got my tank full, my store hidden away, and now I could face chamber music or Mrs. Tabona, or whatever other horror presented itself for the evening.

At nine o'clock the news was broadcast, and the first announcement was that the petrol rationing had been postponed for a week!

VII

Country Life

THE good weather held, which was a mercy, because it was deadly dull in the country, even for a woman born and bred in such surroundings, who once before had had to live in this neighbourhood for her sins. Eighteen years of a wasted youth, squandered on hills, and lanes, and soggy fields, and the making of daisy chains, which may be dressy, but are not likely to broaden one's outlook.

The difficulty with country life is that to-morrow is as good as to-day. Stimulus dies down. Incentive fades. You get to the stage when really you don't care.

Here I was back for the war, and the peculiar thing was that we had lost track of the war! We had got ourselves all worked up to be blown to bits, and the sirens stayed mute, and as far as eye could see and ear could hear nothing at all was happening.

My gas mask developed the more painful kind of hiccoughs. I had never liked it, but realized that possibly it was a good friend, like the French mistress at school, frightful to look at, but undoubtedly meant well. To become accustomed to it, I had got into the habit of wearing it for five minutes every night in my bedroom. It isn't becoming wear. It is like the combinations Mother would buy me when I was very young, awfully useful, and there it ends!

The hiccoughs were annoying and incidentally might be dangerous, because perhaps the thing was

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leaking. How was I to know? I have never had the stamina to grip the tube tightly and wait to see if I suffocate or not. I thought I had better get this attended to.'

I enquired for the local A.R.P. depot, and found that the butcher had 'done it all,' so I went across the road to the little shop, where a funny old man with a yellow moustache was hacking away at a piece of brisket. I don't think he liked the look of me very much, because he asked me what I wanted, and when I said that I was having a spot of bother with my gas mask, he took me into the back room where by the odour I gathered he had had kippers for breakfast.

I presented my mask.

"You hadn't ought to have one of these here," said he, pulling it out of the khaki bag by the tube, which I had been told was a most heinous offence and something that you must never do.

I explained that I had bought it during the Munich crisis for thirty shillings at the Army and Navy Stores, who had raised no objection to selling it to me, and therefore I considered that I had every right to have it.

"Well, it fair flummickses me," said he.

He pulled it about a bit, doing it damage I should think, and finally cast it aside, professing complete ignorance of the way that it worked, clearing himself by saying that it wasn't the right kind and "I hadn't ought to have it at all."

Anyway, he told me that he was only doing this A.R.P. work to oblige, there wasn't nothink in it.

I seemed fated to be left with a gas mask which hiccoughed on me, and I tried my own simple means of blowing hard down it, and twiddling it a bit, and finally decided that I would trust to Heaven and leave it at that.

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It seemed incidentally to be the only conclusion at which I could arrive.

I reserved car riding for Sundays, when Robbie and I could go out together; the rest of the week must be dedicated to the bicycle. But if the gas mask had hiccoughs, the bicycle had worse ones. It seemed very slow and frightfully heavy. Also I found the three-speed gear very baffling.

"But I have always had one," said Robbie.

I haven't.

My first bicycle was my mother's cast-off, and if you ask me she knew what she was doing when she cast it off. It had handlebars like a buffalo's horns, and a bell as big as a cheese plate. I rode it until I was twelve, when I bought myself a Royal Enfield, with the bold device 'Made like a gun' on it, very pleasing to my young mind. But the thing about the bicycle which did not please me and which I could never swallow was the painful fact that I had had to pay for it myself. Ever since my infancy I had saved all birthday tips and Christmas monetary gifts towards one ultimate aim. I wanted to buy a typewriter. My parents however had other ideas, and when I outgrew the abortive-looking bicycle Mother had bequeathed me, they insisted on my drawing on my valuable savings and depleting them almost entirely on a Royal Enfield bicycle made like a gun!

My bicycle should have been a typewriter.

I must say it lasted me, for long after I was married it was still anchored in the garage, and looked upon with considerable loathing by the elegant chauffeur my husband employed. It had no three-speed gear, nor had the F.S. which I bought towards the end of the war, which was a most decrepit old bike, cast

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out by the Dumas family for six bob to the local bike shop, and I paid them four pounds for it. The F.S. (Family Steed) was everybody's bike in turn, but that had no three-speed gear either.

I knew that I should never get very far bicycling in the country, because by now the winds had become consistently colder, and my ears were almost bitten off. There was a frost at morning, and although the days were still hot and comfortable they were laggard in coming out.

This meant that in future I should have to rely on my legs, and my legs are not my strong point, neither to walk upon, nor to look at. My sphere of activity was considerably cut down.

There were walks that one could go, awful walks! I went them alone.

Monday was the excuse to walk to the gardener's to buy flowers for my room. The gardener had a couple of greenhouses with nothing in them, a sundial, and a small Edwardian villa. He sold chrysanthemums and we got friendly, so that he was somebody to exchange a word or two with. He was much concerned about the rabbits which ate off everything that he planted. I told him that probably we should be glad of rabbits later on, and he thought so too.

In the last war I once bought a rabbit in London, and gave five shillings for it. I brought it back and had it cooked, only to find from the cook's young man that it was a cat, and after I had eaten it too!

The gardener told me that I ought to have known; cats have redder flesh than rabbits. The difficulty is what to do when you have not a rabbit to compare it with.

There was a walk across the fields, where I could

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pick blackberries, be chased by horses, or meet the gipsy who always wanted to tell your fortune. She put me off that walk because she was such a pest, and I found that I very seldom took it.

Then there was the duck pond. The lane which ran alongside was under water for most of the winter months, they told me, merely muddy at others. This was not such a good walk really, because beyond throwing stones at the ducks (and you might always be caught doing this, which did not look well), there was nothing to do. The sons of Israel were always here. A host of them had been evacuated into this part of the world, which made the place look more and more like a ghetto every day.

Then there was another road which I used to amble along because there was a field with a white heifer in it. The white heifer would, if whistled at, come towards the fence and stand stolidly there staring at me, and snorting. I could converse with her, but she never conversed back. She was sold by October, and that finished our friendship, which never really reached an intimate stage.

But oh, it was dull!

There was also a leafy lane I walked along, and at the far end there was a log on which I could sit and rest, and take the doughnut I bought to eat there, and wonder how long this would last, and if it were a four-years' war like the last one, whether we shouldn't all be barmy.

And why weren't they getting on with the war, anyway?

On a Saturday I did my shopping, which consisted of going to the bank, which was the most amiable bank I have ever visited, paying the paper bill and discussing the knitting of jumpers with the dear little

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girl in the shop there, and if reckless I would go into the pub. for a coffee. It was very bad coffee, but it did mean that I could talk to the waitress who brought it in.

Robbie was suffering really badly, because the journeys up to London were so dreadful. Some of the evacuated children had not liked life. These were generally those little tartars who had driven foster-mothers crazy. Their own mothers were now in the process of coming into the country and fetching the bad lads home again. It was always the regular little beasts who went back this way, and for a fortnight the trains had been full of mothers with unmanageable children towing back to London.

Under these conditions he had some of the most horrible journeys, though on the whole the evacuation had been managed superbly and worked amazingly well. There were bound to be some fiascos, you could not expect anything else. But for a tired man in a very slow train, with children who screamed, who fought, who slapped their mothers, and who would never do anything they were told, it was not too pleasant.

As for myself, I wilted.

If the whole war was going to be like this I should not die of bombs, I should die of boredom.

Surely this could not go on for ever?

Yet here I was, and not the only one by very long chalks, in company of dozens of others, all unfortunate people who had been forced to leave their comfortable homes in London, their interests, their work, their very life, and now were strutting round country lanes in ridiculous high-heeled shoes, and wondering how to Heaven they had ever worn that particular hat, and if they would get hooted if they went out in it here.

Country Life

My best hat was left in a hedge.

It might be Agnés, but it was no darned good here! I kept the camellias to wear in the evening, but left them on a blackberry bush, a white flag of truce to the war which I had lost.

It was altogether very difficult.

VIII

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THE R.A.F. were incessantly dropping leaflets over Germany. I suppose there must have been some idea behind all this, but for those of us who wanted to get on with the war, it seemed to be a silly way of tackling the business. I, for one, have never fostered any illusions about the nice kind Germans who were only badly misled, and never would have fought us if they had only known.

I'm sorry, but I am going to be bitter.' The nice kind Germans have done this before. They will do it again given half the chance, and I have still got a sufficient number of years left to me to live through yet a third war. I don't like the prospect. I would rather annihilate the nice kind Germans now, and be quite sure of peace for the future.

I think that the trouble with the Treaty of Versailles was that it wasn't hard enough. The Germans are never happy unless they have mustered themselves under some great big bully, and then start tweaking other people's tails. Experience has proved me right, although public opinion may try to prove me wrong.

But I bet the mistake we shall make will be in thinking of them still as nice kind Germans, and we shall have another idiotic peace, and be in the same old scrap heap again twenty years on. It will be no comfort to me to say "I told you so," then.

Even the village idiot seemed to dislike this kind of a war and said so whenever we met; we met a great

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deal too often for my liking. Whenever I put my nose outside the door, there he was. Whenever I flattered myself that I was alone on some pleasant country walk, I would find him pattering along beside me. Little. Charming. Quite harmless. Really rather a dear, but the village idiot for all that.

Things have come to a pretty pass when I have to rely on the village idiot for companionship!

He was selling fire-logs. "Boondles," he said affectionately, "everybody be a-buying them now for the winter. No bombs. Just boondles."

There was a minor altercation in the guest-house, for the Major and Mrs. Tabona fell out. Mrs. Tabona knew the reason for the leaflet dropping, because her friend Mrs. Veet was intimate with the head of the R.A.F. (not in the full sense of the word, you will understand), and the reason for the dropping of the leaflets was secret, very secret indeed, so of course Mrs. Veet knew about it; what she knew, Mrs. Tabona knew also.

The Major lost his temper, and said that it was very doubtful if the head of the R.A.F. told his secrets to a pack of women; he wouldn't be such a fool. That started the ball rolling, and I came up for air several minutes later.

"That man is IM-poss-i-ble," said Mrs. Tabona when she caught me on the stairs, "increddebubly rude. Increddebubly."

"Then, why not let him alone?" I asked.

"One must talk," said Mrs. Tabona, rolling her eyes to Heaven.

"Some must," I said.

The first evacuees had had enough of the country and had left the guest-house. They had caught dreadful colds, because London shoes are not made

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for country lanes, and everything seemed to be getting more and more depressing. There was a general thinning out from our midst; the first signs of winter were at hand. The Michaelmas daisies died in the frost and stood in browned clumps, the roses were shattered. The mist which lay late seemed to permeate everything, so that your very bones were frozen. The usual forecasts of a hard winter were made.

Two new arrivals now appeared, a somewhat retired Colonel and his wife, and of course Mrs. Tabona found out all about them within the first quarter of an hour. I cannot think why *Who's Who* does not employ Mrs. Tabona as a secret agent. There is nothing very secret about her of course, but she does do the job pretty thoroughly when she gets down to it.

The Colonel was a bombastic old gentleman with a rather pregnant figure, and I felt sorry for his little wife, who ran about like a hen in a state of hysteria. She was always disturbed as to what dear Herbert would say. I thought it possible that when dear Herbert made the intimate acquaintance of the doctor's cinematograph, Mrs. Tabona's love of chamber music, and the conversation we suffered from here, he might say the dickens of a lot!

Mrs. Colonel had been a governess, not a very clever one, and she had travelled out to India with the family who employed her. It was just then that the Colonel's first wife had died; she had been a real lady, Mrs. Colonel said pathetically, though strangely enough they had never been really happy.

Little Mrs. Colonel had been kind and sympathetic to him, because she was that kind of sweet little person, and she had no idea that he was setting his topee at

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her; she was far too modest and shy, and she had thought him much too grand. It was just before he had been due to retire that he had asked for her hand in marriage.

She told me all this over tea in the little sitting-room, whither we had sneaked together to escape Mrs. Tabona, who had been trying to impress the community with how much she paid for a pair of shoes, and although she had been talking hard for a couple of hours, she still seemed to have a lot to say.

The Colonel had asked the little governess if she would look after him.

"He just said, 'I need somebody to darn my socks,' " she told me tenderly, and if you ask me that was just about what it was too! The mean old man wanted a cheap housekeeper and seized on the glorious opportunity. And, by Jove, he made her work for her keep!

All day long she was fluttering about doing some job or other for dear Herbert, who was too slack to do it for himself. The absurd part was that the poor little thing seemed to be eternally obliged to him for making an honest woman of her, never realizing that she would have been far better off as a dishonest woman, and not tied to dear Herbert at all!

She gave me details of how wonderful their position had been in India, with an entire garrison flying about at Herbert's behest, and nobody daring to say him nay because he was so clever. She explained how dreadful it had been for him when they had left those shores on retirement. They had been seen off with pomp and glory, and the regimental band blowing its soul out at the quayside with "Home, Sweet Home," and "Auld Lang Syne." Somehow I don't think that Herbert thought it was home, sweet home, leaving all that for this!

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Somebody had given poor little Mrs. Colonel a bouquet, and she had been deeply touched, standing clasping it at the taffrail; but she had waved frantically to friends as the ship moved away and the bouquet had slipped from her hands and had dropped into the water. Herbert had been very angry about it. But then she always did dreadful things like that, she explained, it was just that she wasn't used to grandeur, being so very ordinary, and it made her so ashamed.

I assured her that it might have happened to anybody.

"I cried," said the poor little woman. "I know it was awful of me, and Herbert was terribly angry and talked to me about fighting with my back to the wall, and all that sort of thing, but when everybody was being so very kind, I just couldn't help it."

So they had steamed away, and the band had played (I thought injudiciously) "The Girl I Left Behind Me." But it was ever so lovely, she said.

It seemed that dear Herbert's pomp was doomed to lessen at every port the ship put into. "It was so dreadful for him," she said, "because of course you could not expect people to understand, and I am afraid that he was inclined to blame them for their rudeness."

She never seemed to think of herself at all.

Somebody sat in the sacred deck-chairs labelled Colonel and Mrs. Clayton, 2nd Waziris. At Alexandria a Brigadier boarded the boat and blew away their last claims to priority. What was even worse, he seemed to be rather a larky Brigadier; Herbert was very shocked at the way that he carried on, stopping at nothing to curry popularity and with no proper sense of his position. Even Mrs. Colonel

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insisted that he had behaved in the most unmilitary fashion with the rather got-up girls on board. It was ever such a pity.

England had proved to be very different from the Punjab. Poor Herbert naturally hated having to live on a pension, and he wasn't used to going without. What with prices being so heavy, and servants so rude, it was really very hard on him, she explained. They had thought of going to live in Jersey, where prices were less and income tax reasonable, but then it was very cliquey there and they had none of the proper introductions, which might have made it difficult.

All the time she sympathized with Herbert and I believe that the poor little thing honestly meant it, for she loved him devotedly. She skimped in every possible way that she could, so that he should have everything that he wanted, and her one object was to make life easier for the large pompous pukka sahib that she had married.

"But I love him, and he is so very good to me," she confessed simply.

The country small talk was always of people, and of little circles, and little cliques, and little minds. I thought desperately, "I'll never be able to write another line if I am stuck here for a whole war," and then I would try to pull myself together and march out for a constitutional, because I have got to admit that I could have screamed with the smallness of it, and the encompassing four walls from which there seemed to be no escape, and the desperate longing to meet somebody who could talk and understand, and not think that because you wrote books you had to be "well, just a little queer." "

This was not to be.

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Every evacuee was feeling dull. I believe now that I have a very good idea of what it feels like to go to prison, which is much the same thing.

I was fair quarry for most people. "If only I had the time to jot down my experiences," different members of the guest-house told me, "I could write a book too." Others were more generous; they told me that they could give me any number of plots, I had but to command them, and seemed distressed when I did not give the word of command.

I made the mistake of trying to explain. The incident which seems so thrilling in your own life (because it *is* your own life) is dull on paper. I pick up my plots from contact rather than from second-hand *raconteurs*. I am afraid this book goes to show it.

The only person staying there who would have been useful was the dear old lady with the kind, wise eyes, and the superb intelligence which I admired enormously. Had she unlocked her mind, and admitted me to her store-house, I should have been thrilled, but the wise folks keep authors guessing.

The rest of the community had nothing to tell me really, and I was of little but a passing interest to them. From their point of view writing is a mug's game; it isn't really work, though writers like to think of it as such. Any fool could do it, if only he tried, but it isn't worth bothering about!

I had an absurdly early breakfast and went up to my typewriter immediately afterwards.

Every morning budgets of letters from readers arrived for me. I have two contracts with magazines to reply to these letters, which are chiefly emotional problems and some of them very tragic. Personally I find this work is intensely interesting, but for some reason or other these bulging envelopes invariably

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amuse other people. The guest-house was no exception. They greeted them with hoots, and thought it intensely funny that anybody should want my help. What did I know about it, anyway? .

It is a little difficult to know how to treat these playful sallies. Naturally I wanted to get on to my hind legs, and tell them exactly what I thought of them, but if this happened, I had an idea that what they might think of me would make it necessary for them to part with me!

So the only other thing to do was to say nothing at all, just to smile vaguely, and say, "It is queer, isn't it?"

"Of course," said Mrs. Tabona impressively, "I could write if I wanted to." She had been reading another of my 'little stories' in the *Evening News*, which brought forth this unsolicited information.

"Why 'little story'?" I asked; "it is the usual length."

"How dr-roll you are!" she remarked.

I did not reply, seeing that I might become heated if I tried to explain that nothing enrages an author more than to have his work treated in the patronizing manner in which one speaks of a poor relation, of a social inferior, or, if you are a clergyman's daughter, of a baptist minister! Inadvertently and not thinking what I was doing, I turned on the wireless.

Instantly Mrs. Tabona set up a yell.

"Oh, that fr-rightful man!" she screamed of poor Clarke-Smith. "I can't stand that fr-rightful r-rubbish!"

I turned it off and went to the door. As I opened it, I got a sword-thrust in.

I said, "That happened to be Falstaff. Perhaps you don't care for Shakespeare?"

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And I left before she murdered me.

But it is selfish to keep harping on the disadvantages of being an evacuee. All my friends seemed to be in similar throes. The fact of the matter was that the difference of outlook between townsfolk and country people is too wide. It cannot be bridged. Once I had been country, but I was nothing of the sort now, and could not bring myself to conform to this ghastly dullness. Though it was no worse for me than for anybody else really, and hundreds of us were in the same wretched state.

Robbie did not discover this in full force until the first Sunday when we did not use the car, to try to save up a little petrol. The weather had been getting definitely colder all the time. There was that chill in the wind which is the chill of foreboding, and it blew incessantly.

We sat in all the morning reading the papers. We had to choose between the main sitting-room which was so hot that you boiled in it, or the little sitting-room which was so cold that you perished. In the main room Mrs. Tabona sat, so everybody had crowded into the other, which, although it had got up a good old fug, wasn't really warm.

I must say that woman Tabona used strategy. She always managed to get the best room to herself, and the best chair too. If anybody else sat in it, she quite calmly hoofed them out, declaring that she had a bad back (she had injured it ski-ing at some expensive place in some exclusive country) and that was the only chair in the room where she could sit in comfort.

Very clever of her, I thought.

As clever as the great-uncle of mine who was done in the eye by a second wife who looked a fool but couldn't have been. He had been a very fast man

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and his first wife could never keep him at home, which had the most disastrous results. Poor great-aunt had to watch him skedaddling off with any fascinating skirt that whisked itself along. But his second wife knew better! She said that she daren't sleep alone, and she had got him there. If he went away she imported expensive companions and he had to foot the bill, so he never did it twice. Poor great-aunt in Heaven must have wished that she had thought of that one!

Mrs. Tabona was always thinking of things like that. She was never at a loss and left one in breathless admiration of her technique.

Lunch-time came.

There is something very similar about Sunday lunch throughout England, and after that we felt that we must do something now or never, and as there seemed to be little choice we decided that we would go for a walk. It wasn't a case of where, it wasn't a case of which, because there simply wasn't anywhere special to go.

I had exhausted all the old games of an inventive youth when you turned first right, then left four times, and then asked yourself where, oh where, had you got to? In Clare you always got to the station. It seemed the be-all and end-all of existence.

We thought that we would take to the fields, because they looked more countrified, and for a man in London most of his time it gave that sense of rural life which should be so pleasant. We went through clusters of cottages, and turned in at a convenient gate. One thing about the country is that you can walk anywhere, or can't you? There may be no *Keep off the grass* notices, but there are other equally deterring details.

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There was a fitful sun, and the glinting of yellow leaves in the trees, but it was only too apparent that winter would not be long, and the evenings were fast closing in. I simply dared not think what it would be like in eight weeks' time.

"Well, anyway, the air is very fresh," said Robbie determined to be bright.

"Yes, isn't it?" said I without enthusiasm. We were passing somebody's pig yard, and I thought that it had been an ill-advised remark at this particular moment.

"It feels different down here, you know."

"You bet it does," said I.

We walked on across broad, green fields, with an ever keener wind blowing up; then we saw the friendly little donkey. The little donkey was charming and apparently lonely too, for it trotted up to us in an amiable manner and simply asked to be stroked. That was the moment when something truly frightful happened, and I have no idea what it was. A flock of sheep began to run at the far end of the field for no known reason, and they started off a horse which neither of us had noticed until this paralyzing moment.

We share a mutual dislike of horses.

Mine is bred of the early days at home, when they chased me across the field going down to church. Robbie has never had anything to do with them, because mercifully they don't have stables on board ship; his only acquaintance with them was with a beast called Jock, a most artful animal, which he met after he had retired, on the occasion when he had a sudden passion to go pig-farming.

The animal called Jock showed a marked preference for walking on its hind legs and waving its front ones

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at you, after the manner of circus horses. It put the wind up Robbie.

Now we suddenly saw a large gaunt horse coming towards us a good deal faster than we cared about. We turned and walked sharply. We broke into a dignified trot, only to find that this was not helping us much. There came the moment when we were both going full bat, and the horse, even then, was doing a great deal better than we were.

If we had stopped and had said, "Shoo," I daresay it is probable that the horse would have stopped too. But who is going to risk that with four iron-shod hoofs gavotting behind him? Not I, thank you. . .

We got to the stile only just in the nick of time, and the large gaunt horse flew round in circles, churning up the mud with its beastly hoofs, while we panted on the other side and prayed that it had not learnt to jump.

I said, "And this is the country! I'm darned if I don't think that London is safer. You may get run over there, but you won't get chased."

"Now what are we going to do?"

"We can't walk across that field."

"No, of course not."

We chose the other field with the cows in it. You can have great fun with cows, and I have a pretty little game that I patented as a child. As it includes the deft use of an umbrella it might almost be called "Cows à la Chamberlain." You approach them with the umbrella closed, then open it suddenly full blast into their faces. The most surprising things happen. I had had to invent little quips of this nature when young to amuse myself, and they came in very useful during the present strained circumstances.

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"But what about the cows? Surely it doesn't amuse them?" asked Robbie.

As though that mattered!

We mooched round for a bit in the desperate effort to kill time before tea. We wandered into a hen-yard which was strewn with feathers, and with a dead hen lying sprawled in an unlovely attitude across our path. I have a fear of dead things, and especially when they seem to have put themselves to a lot of trouble to die.

"Undoubtedly a fox," said Robbie.

The country is full of this sort of incident. It is innately cruel. What is always so extraordinary to me is the fact that the farmers seem to go to no trouble to protect their live stock. They let this sort of thing happen, when surely it could easily be prevented by fox-proof pens? They are always grouching about their losses, but you have only to tramp across the country to realize that quite a lot of these losses are due to bad farming.

Even after this we had time in hand.

As we could not stay mooching about much longer, we decided that there was nothing much doing and that we would go and sit over the little fire in the bedroom until after tea. Later there was always the wireless to listen to, we told one another brightly. We weren't so bright about that when we settled down after dinner, because the programme consisted of a church service, followed by a charitable appeal, and then a homely little chat on bee-keeping. It seemed hardly worth staying upstairs for, save that there had been nothing worth going down for. It was all part of the vicious circle.

It seemed an eternity to bed-time.

"I say, what *do* you do with yourself in this place?"

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asked Robbie, torn with indecision between sitting on and listening to the domestic life of a well-run apiary, or going downstairs and facing Mrs. Tabona in the main sitting-room, or the Colonel talking 2nd Waziri with the rest of the community in the little sitting-room.

"I don't," said I.

Mentally I made a note. It was at least three hours before we could find a decent excuse to go to bed!

IX

Time Goes On

THE evacuated children still seemed to be causing a good deal of trouble. They had all gone away from the parish which had been my father's. The L.C.C. teacher had discovered that the school was too far and she had removed her flock to the village where the school actually was. She was very definite.

Nobody, she said, could expect children to walk all that distance, not decent children.

This was a regrettable remark, for it got the village up in arms. They had all plodded over to the schools, as had their mammas and papas before them. They had walked it when the snows came, and, believe me, in the Cotswolds the snows can come! What is more, they can stay with you a great deal longer than any reasonable person cares about. They had waded the walk to school through the floods. They had walked it when the May winds blew gentle pneumonia-bearing zephyrs across the valley, and they were turned out at midday to eat their dinners on the village green, and they had toiled back on dark evenings losing some of their community by the way.

They knew all about the trip to and from school. For instance—poor Lucy!

Poor Lucy lived at a melancholy place called a field barn. They have these little vagaries in Warwickshire; they are dismally isolated cottages, not fit for barn or field, but are situated in a lone

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rickyard, with not so much as a road to it. The idea is that the farmer sticks a man there to mind the ricks and the stables should anybody try to pinch anything. This particular field barn was all three miles from the school and poor Lucy was a not very robust five-year-old.

My father appealed to the powers-that-be that the child might be released from educational advantages until her legs grew longer, but the authorities were adamant. Poor Lucy must be taught the things which were of no use to her, and her little legs must suffer for it. To and fro she trudged. I often met her crying from exhaustion. But free education it is, and it has to be thrust down little throats to the detriment of little legs.

Many is the time that I have boiled with fury when I have thought of poor Lucy and what she went through. The cruelty of the country was something the L.C.C. had got to learn about. It isn't pleasant teaching.

Meanwhile with the inconsistency of villages, the place was disgusted that the children (which they had never wanted) should be removed from their midst to the opponent parish over the hill. Their tribal instincts were stirred, and this is something that even the L.C.C. cannot control.

There is always a feud between local villages, and nothing and no one will ever conquer it. One place cannot know another. It isn't done. There is rivalry in people, in churches, in parsons, in rummage sales, and the summer galas known as 'feets.'

Naturally now they were incensed and thought it most unfair that the children should be wafted away and given to their rivals. I went over to have a look at things. I think the other village had got the

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worst of this bargain, for the children were extremely difficult, and ultimately an empty house had to be taken to provide a playroom for them. It was a very dilapidated cottage in a row, with a bowl of dirty water for them to wash in, no amenities, and an open fire, which I thought was a scandal.

The village was now settling down to a more or less normal way of living; the men who were scheduled in services had gone, the others looked like staying the course, because nothing was happening.

That was the difficult part of this war, we were not getting on with it. The powers-that-be kept purring satisfaction, and saying that everything was just grand, but nothing had started, with the result that we were not one whit nearer peace day.

"And I wonder what peace day will be like?" I said to Robbie.

"Like the last," he suggested.

God forbid!

I know that I waited all the afternoon at a tea fight for the general public given on Frinton green-sward, and I went to a fancy-dress dance at Walton-on-the-Naze in the evening. I rode over on a bicycle, dressed as Peace, in a white nightgown, with a wreath of Madonna lilies, and carrying the baby's stuffed canary which had been dipped in the lawn-marker and was supposed to represent a dove.

I have no wish to repeat these activities next time, nor to meander forth as Peace on a bicycle.

But life was not without its problems.

In town once a week I had gone to a hairdresser's, and had been 'done.' It was a routine. There was a local hairdresser and I tried her once. The

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next nearest was about sixteen miles away, and the dearth of petrol did not help. The question was how we were going to get anywhere, and whether it was better to let my hair go to blazes and be done with it. If it was a long war, it would go to blazes anyhow, or it looked like it. Bus services were much depleted. Getting about was extraordinarily difficult.

Ultimately I decided that I would save up the petrol and once a fortnight I would make an expedition. It could be looked forward to as something of a gala, and I would take the car very slowly so as to get the most out of it. I could free-wheel down all the hills, which ought to save a bit, though the defeating habit of all hills is that although you may free-wheel down, there is the nasty certainty that there is another side to them which you definitely cannot hope to free-wheel up!

Going slowly ought to be a definite save.

I would travel forth to one of the neighbouring towns, find a hairdresser and enjoy myself.

The next thing that I, in common with other women evacuees, had to discover, was the fact that there is an enormous difference between the provincial barber and the one in London. The provincial barber goes to some trouble to tell you that he is a great deal better than the London one, at half the price, but I prefer full price and London's trained hands.

Young women fiddled with my hair, asked what I did for a living, and when I said with due humbleness "I write," said that was nice, and they had thought of writing themselves, but it was so much better to have a decent job, wasn't it?

To which I always replied that it was.

I thanked Heaven that I had had a perm. in July, but it looked as though it would be necessary for it

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to last me for three years at least at this rate of military stagnation.

I debated as to whether it would be better to give up clinging to the few looks the passing years had left me and go plain, and have done with it.

I won't give up, said the fighting spirit.

So once a fortnight I and my gas mask (a service one may be adequate, but it weighs a ton) set off to the town, parked the car with difficulty and some nudging and at vast expense to the park attendant, and then crammed a fortnight's duty to hair and nails into a blissful hour with not very adept young women.

But I do think that parks are inconsiderate; they might at least let you stay there all day, seeing the infernal trouble that they are to get into; instead they dole you out a beastly little ticket which amounts to the polite kick-out at the end of three hours. I think it is disgusting.

Another snag was the clothes that I had got. Living in London I only had clothes suitable for London, which were extremely unsuitable to the country. I'm the fussy type and I wear fussy clothes. I wish I could wear tweeds and spats, for they seemed to be all the rage in the Cotswolds; and suède jackets. There was a natty line in suède going about the place on almost anybody who was anybody.

The rustics thought my silver-fox coat was "ever so foony," so did I if it came to that, but what could I do? I'd got to keep warm. Already I was saddled with more luggage than I cared about, and nothing could be thrown away at a time when everything was likely to get more expensive. I bought a skirt and produced my jumpers and tried to look country cousin in faithful imitation of rectorial days. I

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looked lousy, but that seemed to be the right thing. All I asked was to be inconspicuous.

The worst part was knowing nobody.

To be suddenly cut off from all friends, and stranded like this at a time when one's mind was in a state of tension, was most unpleasant. The years had gone on apace since I was eighteen, and unfortunately I am an effacing person and did not like to make myself known to old friends who might not have felt too anxious to meet me. A prophet hath no honour in his own country, and near Stratford-on-Avon there is but one writer. Nobody else dare lift a pen. I was also sadly limited by the unfortunate necessity of only being able to visit friends who had a drive in which I could turn round, or from whose front doors there was some means of exit without necessitating going backwards.

Reversing had already led me into supreme difficulties in Cirencester market-place, where I had injudiciously parked myself, because at that particular moment there was nobody else about. It didn't last. I went to have a coffee and came back to find everybody else about and some of them had mistakenly parked themselves close to Little Eke. She was in fact hemmed in. I had to come out backwards or stay there all day, which my ticket would not permit, and I struck several things as I proceeded forth, in fact the rear wing has never been quite the same since because I ran into a cart load of swedes. It was a most humiliating experience.

I did not tell many friends of my presence; it saved them having to bother about me. The country is definitely self-centred; they cannot see beyond their own little circle. I had to continue being lonely.

Just at first there had been excitement, and the

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feeling that you were escaping a horror almost worse than death. That was over. There had been the arduous blackout campaign, the evacuation stunt, the control of petrol, the imminence of rationing, and the sinking of the *Courageous*. That was horrible. I was sitting sewing in my bedroom, having been obliged to quit the main sitting-room owing to a little trouble between the Maltese element and the Waziris. I heard this dreadful piece of information on the four o'clock news.

Somehow I had never thought that anybody could sink the *Courageous*. I remembered seeing her last at Gibraltar, coming into the harbour and anchoring with the other aircraft carriers off Algéiras, with the blue mountains behind her. That had been in the good old days when we had never thought that there was the possibility of a war again. It is true that I had known nobody in the *Courageous*, save the messman, who used to send me bunches of the most exquisite flowers, to which Robbie objected. I had never had anybody send me such lovely flowers before, and they made my bedroom at the Hotel Cecil very pleasant, so that I could see no reason for this objection of his. It was unlikely that I should run off with the messman, especially as he happened to be a Maltese one, and it seemed a pity to return good flowers and to hurt anybody's feelings. Naturally you cannot expect a husband to see such matters eye to eye with you; he was inclined to bigotry, he talked about bribery, which was sheer nonsense. The messman had nothing to get out of me. But, said Robbie, the messman was hoping for favours from him, would I kindly leave off thinking about myself all the time, and 'see some of these things from his point of view?

Time Goes On

It made it very awkward.

The *Courageous* was a grand ship, and when I heard that she was sunk, I cried, not that that helped anybody.

Nowadays none of us were jittery in the way that we had been during the Munich crisis. I think that was the worst period I have ever lived through. We had got to admit that the war, when it had actually happened, was nothing like as bad as we had expected.

Five weeks on we were all apparently exactly where we had been on September the third, save that poor little Poland had suffered terribly, and we still had the dim presentiment somewhere deep down inside ourselves that something awful was bound to happen before very long. I shall never believe but that the strange peace which came immediately after the declaration of war was not one of Hitler's most subtle methods of making war.

"I really think that you might come up to town for a night," said Robbie one evening when he returned in the dismally unlighted train which must have sent him almost potty.

"You don't mean it?"

"I do. I think that it would do you good."

I danced with joy when I found that he really meant it. At one time I had believed that I should never see London again, save perhaps the rebuilding of a new London on a smashed foundation. I could not believe that I was actually going to sneak up for a few hours and see it all once more. It sounded like the most wonderful thing that had ever happened.

I travelled up with Robbie the next day to spend the night in the poor little flat whence all the furniture had been stripped, save a bed, a couple of chairs and a table. It was the shadow of its former self. I felt

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Joys at the Arts Theatre Club, which was about the only show on in London. I had never brought a torch, so had to feel my way along the side of a house. I went on grandly for a bit, till a group of sandbags caught me as a rooting pig catches you off your balance, and I flopped down on to the top of them. Sandbags are uncommonly hard things to fall upon, and I was considerably shaken because somehow I had never expected them to be there at all.

Robbie and I had a picnic meal in the flat, drinking white wine out of a couple of egg-cups which were all that we had left, and debating as to whether we should ever see the furniture back here again. What would happen to us if the Foreign Office did eventually decide to go country? I rather felt that it would stay smug (it is rather smug, you know); it would be far more refined for it to stay perched in Whitehall, with a perfectly good air-raid shelter, than to go down into the country with mud, and 'oiks,' and the sneaking contempt of the locals.

I felt almost like crying to be in the Arts Theatre Club again, and to sit inside a theatre and hear somebody laugh. I mean really laugh, not that persistent girlish giggle of the guest-house, where everybody was 'such a one!' I wish that Ridgeway's Late Joys realized how much they did for me that night. They gave me back sanity. I seemed suddenly to be miles from the duck pond, and the village looney with his 'boondles,' and the lovesick cow in the barn, who mooed all night.

They were all part of another world.

Next day I had an orgy of shopping, but even that had changed a good deal, and not in the way that you might have expected. The shops were showing new lines in luminous flowers to wear in the

Time Goes On

blackout, discs to fit into your heels, and white boots and buttons.

I did not think so much of this vogue for white, because it does not show up sufficiently. Only the night before I had been out with an escort, one of those nice quiet pedantic little men who think that they are making a great impression, and who are, though not in the way they mean. I had said "I can't see why they don't put gas masks into white cases?"

He replied rather miserably, "Mine is in a white case," which made me most embarrassed, because honestly I had not seen it and am sure that he accepted this as being a personal slight.

London was full of unemployment. Laundries had collapsed, and so had far too many garages and hotels; the florists and beauty shops were in for a bad time in common with most of the luxury trades. It was depressing to see how suddenly and irrevocably this war had dealt out its blows. Nobody seemed to have escaped it.

In the beginning I had hated going rural, but now, curiously enough, I was almost glad to escape from a London which was very different from the old, gay London that we had all known. Sitting in the train travelling back, I wondered rather wretchedly if it was ever to be born again, or if, like Vienna, it had passed for ever.

But this is not the spirit in which wars are won.

X

The Army

THE Army arrived.

Many places in the neighbourhood had been commandeered, and now a wave of consternation ran through the guest-house as to whether it would be our turn next, and if this would entail the turning out of all the evacuees at only a few hours' notice. Mrs. Tabona and the 2nd Waziris were very heated about the unfairness of such a procedure.

I have now arrived at the age when I can say Joho Soho (what is, is) with more resignation than in my youth. Even if all England were commandeered, undoubtedly I should get in somewhere. Failing that, I should have to go back to the flat, bereft of almost all the furniture, its windows gracefully latticed with brown paper, and an inspiring notice by the side of the front door, bearing the words,

THIS WAY TO THE AIR-RAID SHELTER.
FOR FIFTY PERSONS.

I wonder what would happen to the fifty-first? Anyway, I believe that it is pretty dull down there, because Robbie went and had a look. They serve you out with tea and coffee for a consideration. Most people, I should imagine, feel more like being sick than drinking tea.

The Army called at the guest-house, made a few enquiries, then went away again, probably to return later.

The Army

I was growing very sick of it all. My long walks were dismal, and my very one-sided conversations with heifers over isolated gates were getting on my nerves. I was distracted for something to do. I could not write for ever; I had sewed my fingers to the bone. Harrod's library were very kind with sending library books, which I devoured, and I felt perhaps the Army might offer the welcome light relief which I needed.

I had been most disappointed in my bicycle. There was always a wind, and I hate wind, inside and out. Again, it was seven miles anywhere, and when you had got there it was nowhere much, and seven miles is fourteen all told, with hills which are young mountains, and a very heavy-going bicycle. It was that three-speed gear. Either I could not manage it, or it could manage me. Either my feet were flying round madly, or getting nowhere at all. I preferred mother's old bike with the buffalo horns for handlebars and the bell like a cheese plate.

The doctor brought in his home-made cinema again, which was shattering. He had expected to be called up to very active service with the local hospital, which, having kicked out all its patients, was still waiting for the innumerable casualties to roll in. Nothing had happened. I think it afforded the doctor some consolation to bring round his beastly cinematograph apparatus and set it up in our dining-room under the pretext of giving us a treat. He seemed to have innumerable films and all very dull indeed. We had to applaud him, and he took this for encouragement, and said that he would come again next week and was glad that we had liked the pictures so much.

The Log of No Lady

It was a complication the average guest would not have anticipated.

My friends were limited; there was the dear little girl at the paper shop, and the 'paper-boy' who was about forty-five, and wore cycling knickers, and the young man at the hunting tailor's, who sold knitting wool, which seemed a trifle odd; also there was the station where I spent hours of my time.

I and the whole of the station were fast friends.

Although Robbie's train was due to arrive every other night at half-past seven, I used to turn up at the station between half-past five and six, because it made it seem as though I had something definite to do. I could sit there as well as anywhere else, and in my present state of dullness it did represent a little life, or anyway I thought that it did.

A goods train rumbled along about half an hour later, which was something to look forward to. There was the Worcester train which came through at seven. The station staff seemed to grow a little anxious about me, and they would come and sit by my side and talk. They were all dears. In between times they ran up to the signal-box for a nice cup of tea. I secretly hoped that I should be asked in to one of these parties, but apparently I missed the boat, because nobody ever asked me, and I would so have loved having a nice cup of tea in a signal-box.

It was altogether a very happy-go-lucky station, but a very pleasant one.

If you were late for a train they obligingly held it up for you, and in some cases you just hopped across the lines and got in the wrong side, if you could. Nobody was in the least particular as to what

The Army

you did. One young man bicycled up the lines once, and caught the train by the guard's van, which I thought took a bit of beating.

But unfortunately the most difficult part was that the railway service had gone completely to pot, and every train was hopelessly unpunctual so that you never really knew which was which, for it was nothing for them to be over an hour late. When you thought you were catching the 7.15, it was quite likely that it was really the 5.40.

As the evenings drew in more and more, the lights became a complication, because it grew very dark. The actual work of the station was carried out with hooded hurricane lamps with which you could see exactly nothing, and if I dropped a stitch as I sat and knitted, that meant the end of the work. I wasn't allowed to strike matches. All this excessive darkness seemed futile, because the engines made such a red glow as they came along that you would have thought that they could easily be picked out from the air, but I suppose that wasn't so really.

When Sir John Simon's budget came along, it hit hard. Only the night before, Mrs. Tabona had been convinced that income tax would only go up a shilling, because Mrs. Veet had said so, and her husband announced that it could not be more or else it would kill trade.

Mr. Tabona (who I had presumed was also Maltese by the name) had never appeared in our midst so far. He was always coming down, but he did not arrive. There were week-ends when she went about goggling, and saying that Leo would be here this afternoon, but I gather Leo knew better than that! I began to doubt Mr. Tabona. Supposing there wasn't such a person?

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He was Russian, said she. Red or white, I asked, which all sounded a bit Alice-in-Wonderland.

"Imper-IAL," said she impressively.

Personally in this war I feel all Russians, imperial or otherwise, are a bit dirty. The ones I have had the misfortune to meet in my life have never been too—well, anyway I did think that Tabona was a funny name for a Russian to have.

Mrs. Tabona went on dreadfully about the income tax. Super-tax was to stay as it was, and naturally the Tabonas, and of course the Veets, paid fabulous sums in super-tax. When the budget was announced the hubbub in the main sitting-room was surprising. The Tabonas were hit harder than anyone else, as you might have supposed. The fleet of Rolls Royces, which incidentally nobody had yet sighted, would have to be put by. The handsome house at a fabulous rent would have to be closed. Innumerable servants would be dismissed, and the furniture beyond price would be stored. It was a bad let-down.

"*C'est la guerre*," said I, I hoped brightly.

"It does not AF-fect you like it AF-fects me," said Mrs. Tabona, who hadn't a man in the shape of husband or son of fighting age; I had, and I felt keenly on that point.

Colonel Clayton was very angry, because he considered that he paid quite enough already, and what was more he was paying for something that he did not get. England was badly worked, servants were dear, food was impossible, rents were prohibitive; we should just see what it was like in India, where a man could live like a gentleman, and be a gentleman, and have his polo and his *chota hazri* and shoot lion and tiger, and all the rest of it, and all for about twopence halfpenny a week. Also he did not

The Army

approve of the way the war was being run. He could have done it so much better.

Another fact which upset him was that he had retrenched on every possible point, and could not economize further. I met his poor little wife plodding along to the post, to return the woollen combinations that she had had on appro. from Harrod's.

"I know that this is a very cold part of the country, but I'll get used to it," she said bravely. "It's no good coddling, is it?"

Cold was the word!

The snow arrived in the middle of October when everywhere else was balmy. It was fine powdery snow, like sugar, and it drifted in through my bedroom window, which was very pretty but extremely chilly.

Although you put all the bedclothes on you, and your winter coat, and your siren suit, it did not seem to make much difference when you woke in the morning and found yourself chilled to the marrow. I saw myself having to buy some bed-socks, and I thought that would be too horrible. It is the admittance of gouty old age, it is the end of romance, the end of everything that makes life worth living when you consign yourself to bed-socks.

"Was it always like this?" asked Robbie, putting a petunia nose over the blankets in a frigid dawn.

"Always," said I bitterly, with horrible memories of the times when I had lain shivering, and wondering if I could ever bring myself to face the horror of getting dressed. I invented rather desperate little games to start those days. Saying, One, two, three, Up, to myself, only the Up very often wasn't up at all, because I jolly well stayed where I was.

The guest-house was beautifully central-heated, so

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that I ought not to have grumbled, but it was a cold room in the east wing, and although I ought to have revelled in the morning sunshine, at that time of the year the east is never very warm.

"Look here," said Robbie, "I doubt if you will be able to stick this much longer. We ought to think out some other arrangement. What shall we do?"

It wasn't so easy.

The Army marched in to the tune of "Run, Rabbit, Run," and judging by the behaviour of the village girls who goofed at them (they were very 1914 really, for human nature does not change), it looked as though we should have a much increased population by the next summer.

It was a miscellaneous army.

During the last war I married a young captain. Those were the days when privates and captains could not meet even in your own dining-room, which proved to be awkward because my own brother was a corporal and came home to stay with us on leave from Egypt. It meant a lot of tricky arrangement, and the digging out of a much creased navy-blue suit, only to have him promptly presented with a white feather by some ardent young woman.

This was not that sort of war, because everybody was most matey, and privates wanted a hair-cut badly and the uniform, though much more comfortable than last time, is hardly smart.

Dear me! I grow like the officer's lady picking holes, and being far more military than her husband.

The soldiers were billeted everywhere, and in the barn opposite, and when the Colonel went rounds I watched them throw peanuts at him from the granary window and then bob back again. It was great fun. It wasn't like that last time. There was an awful

The Army

fuss once because some misguided company sang to the Colonel when he went rounds!

“Oh, wash me in the water
That you wash your dirty daughter,
And I shall be whiter than the whitewash on the
wall.”

The Colonel resented this and said so, and C.B.'d them or whatever it is that colonels do.

That time it was all discipline and I must admit that they were a very smart body of men. • This was the nucleus of another great little army, some of all sorts but with the same old soldierly instincts. The gentle art of scrounging began in our midst, and the old hobby of chi-iking. When it came on to rain and I had to run for home (when your set and wave has to last a fortnight and you have no hat, don't you just leg it!) they sang after me,

“Run, Rabbit, Run.”

That was true soldier. Last war when I went out in my little V.A.D. uniform, they sang:

“I don't want to get well,
I don't want to get well,
I'm in love with a beautiful nurse.”

This war it is “Run, Rabbit, Run.” There is no real difference.

The guest-house had not been commandeered, but the military arrived, preceded by the most charming batman who was mistaken for an officer by some of us, with consequent upset and loss of prestige. Though in this war it is the thing to be in the ranks. All the best people are tommies. • It is the soldier's war all right, and no mistake about it.

The guest-house rang with the clink of spurs, and

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some of the young men were not too used to them and came unholy croppers taking the stairs at the run. Spurs are death-traps on stairs. I don't know how men ever get used to them. Others, unaccustomed to low old houses, cracked their heads on beams, and swore lustily, but they were a cheery community, and they amused me a lot.

Mrs. Tabona had a great time.

I had not suspected her of romantic intentions, but she was determined to miss nothing that was going. She was always dropping her knitting wool, and getting the Major to grovel for it. She could never find her handkerchief alone, and of course the trouble with her torch when she wanted to go out at night was most amazing. She was the poor little girl in need of assistance, and really with that bust she couldn't do it!

There came the time, and it came very soon, when the Major was impervious to all her hints, and then she said that he was a very rude man (it was abominabubble) and she didn't know what the Army was coming to when it made men officers who were not gentlemen at all.

Naturally the Pukka Sahib Colonel could not stick the new Territorial Colonel, that was asking a bit too much. They fought for the bathroom, which happened to be close to my room, so that I could hear it all. Every morning they got up earlier and earlier to have the honour and glory of sporting their oak on the late-comer. The occupant who had got possession of the bathroom always sang lustily, and kept it as long as he could. You can imagine what it was like.

No colonel looks his best stampeding round at dawn, trying to wrest a bath from another.

The Army

Lying in bed, with a magenta nose over the clothes, and wondering when I could muster the courage to face the chilly morn myself, I would hear "Land of Hope and Glory" being bawled from the bathroom alongside, whilst on the landing the defeated colonel dropped sponges and swore, and beat on the door and demanded in stern tones—

"When the Hell are you coming out?"

Next morning he wasn't caught that way; he was the man inside, and that was when he would get his own back.

It did not make for peace.

Outside the dining-room when I ate my breakfast P.T. was always in progress. It was a painful sight to see pink-faced young men in that cold, slapping their hands together, thumping their arms to their sides and trying to keep warm. I thought that they seemed to be most inadequately clothed, but Robbie said that just went to show that I knew nothing about it. Very soon I was so busy trying to keep myself warm that I lost interest in their difficulties.

But the Army had arrived.

XI

Whither?

THE *Royal Oak* had gone.

Robbie and I were married from the *Oak* one snowy November day, fourteen years ago. She was a magnificent ship. Robbie was solemnly rowed ashore, with a wreath hung from her foremast to show that one of her officers was getting married. He was accompanied by another boat.

Some wit, wishing to be amusing, had mustered the marine band and had popped it into the attendant boat, with instructions to play Robbie ashore to the tune of the Wedding March. It was a very cold day. The Marine band had brought no music in their flurry, and only knew the first four lines of the Wedding March, which they played over and over again most monotonously, whilst the bandmaster stood up in the boat giving the most frightful lurches, and conducting hard all the time.

I suppose this delicate attention cost Robbie free beer all round.

I have only the most affectionate remembrances of the *Royal Oak*, which I felt was the cheeriest ship that he ever served in. She looked grand when she sailed down the Firth of Forth that brilliant July morning of 1925, on her way to act as guardship at Cowes. Every bit of her paint-work had been polished till it was like a mirror, and every man was on his best behaviour. But how I cursed her, when a week after our wedding she suddenly decided to take herself off to Malta for three years.

Whither ?

I must have followed that ship half round Europe, molested by dagoes, arriving at ports she had changed her mind about and had decided to go elsewhere, packing again, trying to find where the dickens she was. Malta, Gibraltar, Brioni, Greek islands, Cannes, Monte Carlo, Dubrovnik. And all the rest of them!

Every Naval Officer's wife knows the routine.

I was with the *Oak* when she figured so ignominiously in a little trouble with an admiral and a bandmaster who objected to the rudery of the old gentleman's manner of address. I was awaiting the arrival of the ship at Gibraltar, and the moment my husband came ashore, I babbled, "Have you heard what has happened with the bandmaster?"

He said, "My God! This is all supposed to be a deadly secret, how on earth did you find out? You women will nose out anything!"

But all that was over.

"If they can get the *Oak*," I thought, "they can get anything, surely."

I was beginning to get rather worried. Quite honestly, since the war started we did not seem to have got very far. In the last war victory had always seemed to be only just round the corner, so that it made matters easier to live through. But this time everything seemed to be at an impasse, and I felt dreadfully alone with home gone, a stranger in strange surroundings, and starved for companionship. Also I am a martyr to migraine, which does not make life any more cheerful under even the best conditions.

It would be awful if we did not win the war after all!

Ultimately I decided that we probably should win. I came to that conclusion on the day when the

The Log of No Lady

regiment which was stationed in Clare marched to church to the tune of "Hang up Your Washing on the Siegfried Line."

We'd get there. Of course we should get there. Any army that can march to that sort of tune will win. I could imagine the little old Hun goose-stepping along with pomposity to "Deutschland über alles."

The weather had changed.

"This simply can't go on," said Robbie in the middle of the night, listening to the wind howling round the chimney-pots.

"I don't see why not."

"You'll die of boredom if you don't die of pneumonia. What about your Aunt Mabel's?"

I said something not usually associated with a daughter of the Church and left it at that.

Aunt Mabel is a dear, very generous, most kind, but wholly engrossed in very good works. She lodges in an amiable farmhouse in Kent, discarded when we first went through suitable places to park myself, because we thought that this was the wrong side of London, and at that time we had been living in hourly horror of appalling air raids. There had been no air raids, and what was more, it seemed as though there might not be anything of this sort for some time. Kent is certainly warmer than the Cotswolds, in fact I had come to the conclusion that nothing could be colder.

But this was not the final straw which sent us scuttling to Aunt Mabel's. Worse was to happen, and in two places.

One morning Mrs. Tabona appeared all smiles and charm, and informed us that she had at last persuaded Mrs. Veet to visit her in her isolation. This

Whither?

was what I had been afraid of all along! Mrs. Veet, said Mrs. Tabona, would be arriving on the Saturday for the week-end to see if she liked it, and oh, what a treat for everybody this was going to be! In my heart I decided that this probably indicated my speedy departure to Aunt Mabel's, even though Robbie, in the manner of all husbands, said, "Oh, I don't know, old Ma Wheat mightn't be too bad!"

The other was an even worse catastrophe, if such a thing could be. We had now run the full gamut of the doctor's home-made films, and had at last done them. They were a dreadful collection, and he believed us to be so interested that he had come in every week, making a routine of it, which was extremely difficult to escape. He was doing a lot for Mr. Temple's arthritis, and Mrs. Temple begged us not to ruffle him up the wrong way, whatever we did, so for the Temples' sake we sat in the dining-room once a week and said, "Isn't that a nice one?" and "Oh, how sweet!" until we could have screamed.

Only last week the doctor had been most apologetic that he had not got any more to show us, little knowing what a blessed relief it was. The thought that one of the major menaces was done with was enough to make us dance. But this was not for long.

Two mornings later I met him in the garage, filling up. He said that he had had a sudden call to Sussex, where his Uncle Albert was seriously ill. Uncle Albert had apparently brought him up, and had done everything for him. He seemed most concerned, and the next day the village looney told me that when the doctor got to Sussex he found that his uncle was already dead, which "were ever such a purty," said the tranquil looney, who always insisted

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on catching up with me on a walk and tootling along beside me.

The doctor stayed away for two days, then suddenly he reappeared on the steps of the guest-house. He was very pleased and smiling, and told us that he had a nice surprise for us. I am always suspicious of nice surprises, since I used to be given Gregory powders in jam, which I have always thought was a dirty trick. Uncle Albert had gone in for the cinema in the home also, it seemed to be a peculiar kind of disease with that family. He had left his dear nephew seven hundred and fifty more films!

I almost swooned!

"That," said Robbie, when he was told about it, "is the end."

"What do we do now?"

"You'd better write to your Aunt Mabel. It is that or nothing."

So I wrote to Aunt Mabel.

XII

The Brigadier

I ARRANGED to go to Aunt Mabel's the following week, which was when I should have sufficient petrol in hand to face the journey.

With the inconsistency of all human nature, I was now reluctant to leave the little place which I had hated so much, even though to stay here might entail pneumonia, which was almost a certainty. I went round saying good-bye to the few people who knew me, the paper-boy of forty-five, the looney who had accompanied me most faithfully on more walks than I cared to remember, and the garage hand whom I had tried to run over. I disposed of my bicycle. The shop took it back for five bob less than I had originally paid, which had been the arrangement, and I threw in the pump, and the tiddly little handlebar basket, and the dress-guard, as goodwill. They were most kind in the bicycle shop, and gave me a walloping big box of apples as a present. I went back and ate them sitting over my little electric fire in my bedroom, and they were the hard, sweet apples of the kind that I like most.

Saving up petrol for the trip to Aunt Mabel's meant using none now. That entailed dull Sundays, and the set and wave having to last three weeks, which it just wouldn't do with decency. And having to wait a little while meant that we contacted Mrs. Veet.

Mr. Taborra was bringing her down by train in person, so the two delights were to be met at one and the same moment. The trains were dismal;

The Log of No Lady

although we had been promised lights, when they had appeared they were pale blue sausages which gave the merest glimmer and no more. I sat for interminable hours at the station with my knitting, and sometimes I was in entire darkness there.

On this particular night I was agog with interest, because Robbie was coming down by the same train as Mrs. Veet and Mr. Tabona, and I was hoping to get the first look at them. He, I gathered, was one of those elegant Russians, naturally very rich, naturally very glamorous, and I almost felt that he might wear a Cossack's hat. There must have been something queer about him because she had kept him dark for so long.

When the time came I did not go out on to the dark platform to meet the train but sat on in the little ticket-office, because the passengers had to pass through this way, and the ticket-collector had a lantern (very dimmed), but by this I stood some chance of recognizing somebody. Strangers were few and far between in Clare, any strange man and woman must be the two.

The train arrived.

Robbie was always the last man off it because it came in in two parts, and he always got into the back coach. I did get the first look at Mrs. Veet and Mr. Tabona, who were almost the first to pass the barrier. Mrs. Veet was a little woman in a tired fur coat, quite ordinary, rather dull, not in the least what I had been led to expect. I stared at Mr. Tabona and could not believe my eyes. It must be that lantern, thought I, but no, it wasn't the lantern. Now I knew why he had not been down before, now I knew why Mrs. Tabona had explained so vehemently that one would do anything for love.

The Brigadier

He was black as your hat!

He was one of those Indian gentlemen who go to Malta and open up a shop in Strada Reale to sell silks and slippers and souvenirs of all kinds. I sank back helplessly.

"I've seen them," I said to Robbie, the moment that he appeared.

Robbie had left his crossword puzzle in the train. I gathered he had been trying to do it on the floor with the aid of matches, anyway he was not in the mood to discuss anything of this sort because to lose his copy of *The Times* is little short of Hell to Robbie. He said, "Seen whom? What on earth are you talking about?"

"Mrs. Veet is nothing, and Tabona is an Indian. I should think she picked him up in Reale."

"What do you mean?"

How can a woman discuss exciting pieces of information with a man like that? Here was the most amazing thing that had yet happened and Robbie with only one interest, and that the lost crossword puzzle. I could have slapped him!

It had been market day. They were still getting unfortunate cows and sheep away from the pens in the market-place, with the blackout fast becoming a menace. Country people are very cruel to their animals; they don't mean to be, but it makes me sick the way the poor creatures are bundled about. Terrified sheep being lambasted by truculent shepherds' boys, distressed cows not knowing what is happening to them, being belaboured by half-wits. Something ought to be done to change this order of things, but nothing ever is. In towns it would never be allowed, but under the gentle beauty of the countryside much goes on that is revolting and to which authority closes its eyes.

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' The moment that I got back into the guest-house, through the intricacies of the blackout *portière*, etc., which got tangled round your legs, and had already been badly treated by the Major's spurs, Mrs. Colonel came out of the little sitting-room with a very worried expression.

She said, "Have you seen it? Herbert says it is terrible. A disgrace allowing it here. And such low caste too!"

Of course Herbert *would* know all about it!

I tried to explain that at the station I had hoped that the lantern might be deceiving me, because it does cast shadows and is so dim, but she said no. The man was a *Box Wallah*, whatever that might be, but Herbert knew by the shape of his ears. Herbert seemed to have taken more than a passing glance at him. I thought to myself, "I bet Mrs. Tabona tries to pass him off as a Spaniard, and I was right there, because she was holding forth in the main sitting-room about her husband's lovely olive skin, and his flashing dark eyes.

"Living in that climate does it," she said, "it gives you the most gorgeous skin!"

I had expected Mrs. Veet to be the chatty sort, but she wasn't. She appeared at dinner in a rather weary silk frock, and she looked considerably worn out by the time Mrs. Tabona had finished telling her all about us. It was in a loud voice too, for Mrs. Tabona was very excited. Mr. Tabona did nothing at all but sit and eat. He did both solidly. I don't think he liked himself, and the Colonel (not the new one, but the Pukka Sahib) kept giving him 2nd Waziri looks, which must have startled him a lot.

We were hustled through dinner, because already the fatal white sheet had been stuck up over the

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sideboard, which meant the worst. The doctor was coming in with some of his Uncle Albert's slides, and he would be here too early if we did not get a move on. So everybody was gingered up to be done, and then we were shepherded into the main sitting-room for coffee, and back into our seats to see the doctor's cinematograph show.

Uncle Albert's slides were worse than the original ones had been; they were of sea scenes, and to my mind all sea scenes look very much alike. Two hours of Uncle Albert's posthumous slides sent us all to bed in very bad tempers.

"This place doesn't improve," said Robbie, "and it is a damned good job that we have made up our minds to go to your Aunt Mabel's."

From what I could see, we were not going to Aunt Mabel's half soon enough.

Another complication had presented itself. Life was beginning to get very difficult, and the queer thing is that events of this nature can only happen in the heart of the country. Truth is so much stranger than fiction that I really hesitate to put it down.

A General arrived and was put into the bedroom near to mine. He was a pre-war General, and had done deeds of gallantry in the last war, and had won distinctions. His name was a common one, and when I first heard it, it aroused memories in me, and I connected it with something, but could not quite trace what.

As a young and not unattractive widow, I had my moments. I think this is not conceit. I had a following of young men with ambitions, and sometimes intentions that were not wholly honourable. Dear Graham was never one of those. He was a most sanitary admirer, who, by his laudable sense of

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propriety, always aroused the worst in me. I am quite sure that he had been his mother's good boy, and was in consequence a rather difficult young man (he had been young at the end of the last war).

Graham was one of those trying people who always did the right thing in any circumstances, wore the right clothes, and behaved like the perfect little gentleman, which had been quite enough to set him up as a target for me to shoot at.

In the old days at Frinton it had been some time before I had gathered that he was what is generally known as 'sweet on me.' It dawned on me the day that he called, and I heard the parlourmaid say to the cook, "Oh, it's only Missis' young man!"

He was never my young man in that sense because at that time I had no intention of remarrying, and had I ever thought of it, Graham would have been the last person who would have aroused romantic ambitions in me.

But from that moment some evil spirit in me began teasing him. I have a perverted mind, and I have to admit that any very good man rouses the ridiculous in me and tempts me beyond endurance. I have to lead him a dance, and poor dear old Graham bought it!

It culminated on the night when he got locked out of his highly respectable diggings (my idea, ably assisted by the fertile brain of a wild young friend in the R.F.C.). Graham had to come back to my house at one in the morning to ask if I could possibly let him sleep in my spare room as he could not make anybody hear. It had to be my spare room or the shelter on the front, and apparently he preferred my spare room. Of course, said I. Next morning the R.F.C. friend caught him leaving the house stealthily,

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and started teasing him about the dishonourableness of his intentions, and the fact that he had undoubtedly compromised me.

Graham got very red, and tried to explain, but of course that is the sort of thing which is far better left unexplained, as any fool knows; but not such a fool as Graham!

I hate to think of the fun that we had with the poor dear, and how finally he must have thanked Heaven when he wiped the dust of Frinton from his shoes, and put me out of his heart for ever.

Though, to give him his due, he kept hanging on to me, believing that he could reform me. He thought it was "my beastly friends who led me astray" and that really "my little heart was the heart of gold, and all he wanted was to clasp it in his manly arms for ever!"

All that happened a very long time ago, and as far as I was concerned it was a closed book which would never reopen. But war has curious little tricks, and all of a sudden I awakened to the fact that it was playing a curious little trick on me now.

Coming out of my bedroom, imagine my confusion when I saw his name plastered all over all manner of kit, and heard his voice from the bedroom alongside. My first idea was to dash in, collapse into his arms, crying, "Darling, at last!" and then scream the roof off and tell everybody that he was my long lost love. That would be one of those situations which had been such a delight to evolve for the poor dear in the bad old days. But second thoughts warned me that this might react more on me than on him, which wasn't my idea at all. After all, he was a Brigadier, and I was merely an authoress, and everybody in the provinces knows that writers are promiscuous.

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Already my style was considerably cramped, for they had realized that I disliked chamber music, hated improving reading, and showed no enthusiasm when I was educated up to home-made films. They knew that I did not go to church, and consorted with the rascallions of the village, porters and paper-mongers and local loonies. I should come off second best, and if there was to be fun at Graham's expense, it must be at *his* expense and not at mine.

I did nothing.

One thing was certain. I told myself that I was one up on dear old Graham, because I knew that he was here, and at the moment he had no idea that the same roof also sheltered me. So I dressed with more than usual care, I might as well show him what he had missed, and down to dinner I went looking too good to be true. I nailed an angelic expression on my face, tried it out on Mr. Tabona with over-marked success, which made me decide that it would do, and then I turned it on to Graham just as he entered the dining-room.

You should have seen it!

It was almost worth the two months' misery at Clare to have that one moment of fun. He was pleased to see me in one way (I think that he really had been fond of me), and then he remembered some of the dreadful things that I had done in the old days, and became petrified that something might happen.

"By Jove," said Graham. "By Jove, I must say! Upon my word, if it isn't little Ursula . . ." and he came over to my table.

"We are both very much older," said little Ursula, hoping that he would take his cue from this one and assume that I was necessarily wiser.

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"I don't feel old; not a day older," said he, his vanity tickled, "and I can't say that you look older."

"But," I told him, "*we are* older. The arteries are not as bobbish as they were, you must confess."

He knew that I was starting it all over again. I saw his eye turn chilly and he did not know how to disentangle himself out of the mess. He tried to be pompous; he tried to tell me of his military prowess, and fingered a certain medal ribbon which conveyed nothing at all to me because I know very little about them. The Victoria Cross is the only one that I can recognize, and it certainly wasn't that.

"I have gone far," said he.

"That was always your trouble," said I sweetly, "perhaps you remember my spare room. . . ."

He did not want to remember my spare room. He looked reproachful when he saw that all he was saying was not going down too well, then he launched himself into pleading. Surely even I must see that I could not let him down before his men? I protested it was nonsense. Who was talking of anybody being let down, anyway? And where were his men?

"And after all, I am so much older," I insisted, "even you must realize that I have outgrown the indiscretions of my youth."

Graham did not like being alluded to as an indiscretion, and he was very doubtful as to whether I had changed that much. The silly ass might have known that I hadn't!

I took him into the main sitting-room after dinner, and introduced him to Mrs. Tabona, which I felt was an unkind cut, though he seemed to take it kindly. Mrs. Tabona was sitting hand-in-hand with Mrs. Veet, whom I am afraid I had misjudged all along. Mrs. Veet was a modest little woman; she

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wasn't a talker, and I doubt if she had ever said one-half of the things which had been attributed to her. In her own absence she acted as a very good clothes-peg for Mrs. Tabona to hang her wisps of conversation on. She was completely overshadowed by her friend, and sat there saying nothing.

Mr. Tabona was in a far chair, very bolt upright, reading one of those improving books with which Indians always seem to be regaling themselves. His English was almost too perfect, and it was the type that only a foreigner could speak. He had a trying little knack of saying "Pleace" just when you did not expect it. Nobody had ever explained to him that you could not use please as thank-you, and he made the most desperate efforts to be wildly polite.

The moment that Mrs. Tabona realized I had known the Brigadier before, my stock went up. I think all along I had disappointed her considerably. She had hoped that I would be a really celebrated writer, and then it would have been possible for her to bask in a little of my reflected glory. From her point of view apparently I knew nobody, leastways the people that I did know I did not bring to the guest-house. I did not like the things that a properly brought-up woman should like, and she knew that she had not impressed me. It was outrageous that I was not impressed by chamber music, and iniquitous that I had caught her out over Clarke-Smith. I refused to be patronized, and what was more, I wouldn't be talked down, therefore she had every reason to dislike me heartily.

Graham was the grand chance to vindicate myself. However, when she started full spate and splash, he looked at me as though he recognized that I had done him an evil turn.

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Later on I suggested that he must rise with the lark if he wanted to get a bath; there were two competing Colonels to be dealt with.

"But surely there is more than one bathroom?" said he.

Certainly there was. There was the one in the West wing where Mrs. Tabona washed, and another along the passage where little Mrs. Colonel went, but only when everybody else had used up all the hot water. She was one of those self-effacing little people who never get a look-in until everybody else has done, because they feel it is rather indecent to be seen in a dressing-gown and carrying a sponge-bag.

"It's a funny sort of a house," said Graham a couple of days later.

I thought it high time to tell him about the ghost. If my memory did not deceive me, Graham had always been a nervous man. I seemed to recall a moment in his life when we had given him a good spooky evening's conversation, and he had been caught on the run! From which I now took my cue. I told him about the ghost, sitting over the little fire in the smaller of the two rooms. It was a hair-raising story of a white lady who had never done anybody any harm, and did not go about with her head under her arm or any rot like that. I made her a reasonable ghost. In the night she walked with frail, hesitating steps, crying weakly, and she had a habit of standing beside your bed, looking down at you wistfully. Nothing alarming, of course, merely very pathetic. Just as she herself was not alarming, I impressed upon him, only a young, beautiful, betrayed girl!

"Poor soul!" said Graham, mopping it up.

I said that she was known to appear on a certain

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night when the moon was in a special phase; rumour had it that it was the room where she had died when her unwanted baby had been born. There was no doubt about it, in the end I was getting a very good story out of it. She turned up between two and three in the morning, which again was the hour when she had passed. How curious these things were, were they not?

The word 'passed' made a great impression on Graham. He asked which room it was. Instantly I became evasive. I know quite well that there is nothing more aggravating than to tell a really good fruity ghost story, and then, when the listener realizes that he is in the house where it may be seen, to go uncomfortable; to beat about the bush, to say nothing that can be construed to mean anything at all, but to give him the awful impression that the haunting takes place in the room which he inhabits.

I saw Graham getting more and more worried. He wanted to force me to admit which room it was, yet did not like to do this, in case it really was his own, of which fact he was becoming more and more dubious.

Mrs. Tabona had to put her foot in it. She arrived back from a tour of the shops, spied us and came in. She could never be left out of any conversation, in fact she usually led the vanguard of any small chat, and naturally she was not going to admit that she had never heard of this ghost before. When he asked her, she chirped up with:

"Oh yes, yes, of course. Everybody knows that, it is nothing new. It's your room, isn't it? Yes, of course," nodding her head as though she knew a great deal more about it than anybody else. Though

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I knew she had never heard tell of it until this moment, when I had actually invented the whole thing.

"Let's talk of something else?" I suggested; "we shall only have him seeing things. It's a shame to frighten him."

Graham wanted to talk about something else; there was nothing that he wanted more, but the demon of doubt being roused, he simply could not let it be. He kept fidgeting. I went on with my sewing. Finally he started wondering if there wasn't another room that he could change into, because he loathed rooms that faced East; he felt the cold very badly. He hoped that he had been clever enough to let pass a suitable lapse of time between the story of the ghost and this statement. I fixed him with a questioning eye.

"Surely you are not really frightened?" said I.

He explained what bosh ghosts were! There weren't such things, as anybody with any sense knew. Nobody paid any attention to the idiotic stories, but he wasn't as young as he used to be (I had said that myself, he reminded me), and he suffered very much with rheumatism. When he had arrived he had not realized how cold the room facing East could be. Nor even that it did face East.

He would go and see Mrs. Temple about it. He was held up a while, for she was having trouble over some anthracite that had been ordered and which had not appeared, but when he got hold of her apparently she told him that she had not got another room free, and he came back looking thoroughly defeated. I think that he wished he had asked for a night-light.

Mrs. Tabona asked him if he would play Patience with her, she knew a good one or two. I pushed him

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into it, one must be helpful to other unfortunates in war-time. After that there started the good old Tabona routine. The dropped knitting ball, the skein of wool that wanted winding, the search for the mislaid handkerchief, and all the rest of it. Graham was completely undermined.

I left early, and went to bed with my knitting and the resolution that I would sit up and listen to the play on the wireless. Much later I heard a disturbance in the garden below. I listened attentively (I never miss anything that I can possibly hear) and it was the sergeant bawling out about why the hell couldn't somebody put their light out.

Aghast, I stared at my own black-out curtains. I had done devilish work with the drawing-pins earlier in the evening, and could have sworn that I was not showing a single streak. Then the truth dawned upon me.

The sergeant was having an altercation with Graham. I could now hear his timorous replies. He was burning a light all night through. He must have got really windy.

XIII

I Leave

AUNT MABEL wrote welcoming me to her fold. She was so pleased about it that I felt ashamed knowing that I was in for a sticky time, but at least Kent would be warmer than these diabolical Cotswolds to which I had now taken a very cordial dislike. Now I was almost ready to move.

A blimp balloon came rollicking over the hills on its own, escaped from some town or other; after it there were a couple of pursuing planes shooting into it with an attempt to bring it down. It was great fun to watch. Looking at the average blimp, you would say that even I could not miss it, but apparently they are not so easy as they look. You should have seen the difficulty the pursuing planes had ambling round and round and hitting nothing at all, while the old balloon went chugging along, just above the roof-tops, trailing an enormous cable after it, which I thought was bound to hit the church in the belfry, which sounds rude, but you probably gather what I mean.

It provided fun for one entire morning, which was something. Now that everything was arranged for me to go away, I began to query the wisdom of it.

"Shall we get air raids, do you suppose?" I asked Robbie.

He said that he did not know.

I ask you, what is the good of a husband in the Foreign Office if he knows nothing? I won't believe that he is as dumb as all that. It is just that he is

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cussed and won't tell. Never a word. Nothing useful. Probably he has the idea that I talk, in which he is undoubtedly correct; still, I do think that he might tell me a few things for the good of my soul sometimes.

• For ages I was asking him if there was going to be a war, and he always said that he didn't know. He must have known a great deal more than I did, for a great while. It is mean to sit tight like that, and so tantalizing.

Weighing up the pros and cons of possible air raids, I had to figure things out for myself, and I suppose that I was one of hundreds of melancholy women, sitting in the countryside, staring over morbid gates at the dullest cows in the world. Fancy living your whole lifetime as a cow! Can you imagine a more melancholy occupation?

There I sat cogitating as to what Hitler would do. It struck me that (a) he wasn't really as scared of reprisals as some of us tried to make out, just because we were frightened. (b) He certainly wasn't holding his hand out of kind-heartedness. (c) It was far more likely that he didn't come over to let fly at England, because at the moment he could not manage it.

How long this happy condition was likely to last one did not know of course; it was a very dubious point if we should go through an entire war without buying it at some time or other, but undoubtedly our forces were growing stronger every day. Even I could see that. Not by the young men who threw peanuts at the Colonel from the granary window, nor the ones who did P.T. outside the dining-room windows in the chilly mornings, but by the aeroplanes for ever coming over the hills from the 'drome.

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I thought there would not be air raids, anyway not for a bit.

Naturally we had our know-alls in the guest-house, people who knew everything, and could tell all sorts of things about to happen. It only needs a war to start all the old gossip and rumours going the rounds. But rumour does not count. I came to the conclusion that in case of raids London itself might be even more desirable than the country. I should hate to be machine-gunned.

By the tone of her letter, Aunt Mabel seemed to want me, which was a pleasant thought, because I had an idea that the guest-house was thoroughly sick of me. She had organized something called a war working party, which she said I could be very useful with.

"You'll like that," said Robbie misguidedly, when he read that part of her letter.

I wondered.

We had working parties at the Rectory at home, and I used to have to read aloud to them; that was how I became so intimately acquainted with *East Lynne*.

Mrs. Temple seemed rather surprised when we said that we were going away; for a mild little woman she was almost emphatic.

Graham had managed to get his bedroom changed after all. He did something clever when Mr. Tabona and Mrs. Veet left. I had thought that Mrs. Veet would be here for good, but she wasn't. She had just come for the week, and went away saying that she preferred aerial bombardment in London to dying of boredom in the country. The moment that Graham found her room would be going begging, he slipped down to Mrs. Temple and effected a

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swop! He came back into the little sitting-room, rubbing his hands, and thinking that he had been very clever.

I said, "It wasn't the ghost that put you off, surely?"

He said no, of course not. It would take more than that sort of nonsense to upset a man of his calibre. He did not believe in spooks, and anyway he had not seen or heard a thing, he slept too well for that. Ha, ha. Easy conscience, what? And all the rest of it.

It didn't end here.

Mrs. Temple had been reluctant to put Graham in Mrs. Veet's room; she said that it was not half such a nice room as the one he already had, and no warmer. The more Mrs. Temple demurred, the more insistent Graham became, until he had at last got her down to facts. It was all arranged.

"Much better," he said, "I really did not care for that other room at all. So damned cold.. The wind has been in the East ever since I got into it, you know."

At the same time, it did seem queer that he had been quite happy in that room before he had heard about the ghost. It wasn't as though I had made it a vicious ghost, either. She never hurt anybody, I had explained that.

Mrs. Temple came in for a moment and Graham insisted on her having a whisky; he had given up his Pussyfoot ideas which had been rather a pest when we had known him at Frinton. He went about now with a portable little cellarette of his own, a basket-work affair, which looked rather innocent, as though he were taking rabbits about the country.

The whistle being whetted, conversation flowed

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more warmly, and eventually Mrs. Temple again referred to this room which Graham was taking over. It was not half such a nice room, she said again. Graham didn't care. It would be a warmer room, he announced. Mrs. Temple had unearthed a small additional stove which she was prepared to have fixed up in Graham's room if he wished, as well as the little one which was already in there. I pricked up my ears at this, for I remembered that the little one already there was the old dud that I had once had. It had gone wrong on me, and one day, when nobody was about and I thought that I should not be detected, I had transferred it into the room next door, and had helped myself to their nice one on the principle that exchange is no robbery.

No wonder poor old Graham was frozen!

He was not satisfied with Mrs. Temple's offer. No, he preferred to move; she had not yet rumbled the fact that other motives were distressing him. Another whisky and the truth came out. Would you believe it, it was the one thing that neither of us had thought of. When the Temples had bought this place ten years ago, it had consisted of two dilapidated old houses, which they had made into the one. All sorts of alterations had been necessary before they could get it into working order, and all sorts of stories had come out about it. The second house had at some time or other been used by a few retiring nuns as a young convent. There had been some peculiar goings-on in it. I could see that Mrs. Temple had a dislike of convents; she was obviously one of those stout protestants who do not hold with ritual and cherish the belief that the main duty of nuns is to entertain the priest. She said that when they

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started pulling down the walls, things were found, and her voice became very grave. She did not say what the things actually were, even though I pressed hard, recognizing this as a point on which she did not want to be pressed. There had been the usual rumours in the village about the place being haunted, but of course, she added, there were rumours like that with every old house in the world.

Graham said he knew all about it.

"Oh, then that's all right," said she. "We have never seen anything, and have never met anybody who has. It is all a pack of nonsense if you ask me, and probably invented by somebody who had had one over the eight. But seeing that the room you are moving to is . . ."

That was when I began to laugh.

I shall never forget how furious Graham was with me; although I knew that he would never forgive me, the trouble was that I could not stop. So I went up to bed. As I left, Graham was trying to get back to the topic of the additional stove that she had mentioned, and he was talking about the cold making a man of a fellow!

My last day at the guest-house was a very dour Sunday. There was nothing to do. As usual we rose as late as we dared, and sat trying to make the Sunday papers last out, whilst the sun peered fretfully through a cloudy sky. Then we went for a walk to get an appetite.

I said, "Oh, Robbie, I think I should have gone daft if I had had to stay here."

He knew that I would too.

In these months I had written more that I would have believed possible, even for myself who am as prolific as the best of them. I had made an entire

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trousseau of lingerie, six of everything, and had knitted innumerable garments.

In my desperate desire to find some means of killing the time which hung like a shroud upon me, I had even been reduced to borrowing the gardener's best shears and going round the neighbouring churchyards, clipping the graves of people I had once known and who had apparently been forgotten. This is a thankless task. No sooner do you get the graves neat and tidy, and sorted out the nettles and the long grass, and had all your own finger-nails broken, than firstly it all grows again, and secondly you catch the cold of your life!

I caught a beauty. I don't think I ever knew such a cold, save that Robbie had one to equal it, which he must have caught from me. For a whole ten days I suffered misery, lying in my room, staggering down for meals, to be treated like a pariah by Mrs. Tabona, who was terrified that she would catch it.

Earlier in the year she had produced one which she had alluded to as "my catarrh," which was nothing of the sort. She had not been afraid of handing that round the place, and by the time I contracted mine everybody had got them.

We went out that Sunday afternoon for a last look at the neighbourhood. It was very depressing. We visited the pigs in their sty at the end of the road, and scratched their backs and smelt the smell which is not of righteousness, and went on to see the ducks. They were so noisy that we left them early. We wandered far and on to the old Fosse Way, trying to feel that age had made it romantic. The only point of the old Fosse Way as far as I can see is that it leads you to other and fairer climates.

And, thought I, as I went to bed at night and hit

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my head for the last time on a beam that really I ought to have known by now, I only pray that I shall be happier at Aunt Mabel's.

At least hers was not an old house. It was the product of the last century, which means Victoria at her worst, and although you may condemn Victoria (she was a bit bow-window and grey slate), she dealt with draughts, she did not let the snow in, and you could stick drawing-pins into her window sashes.

This ancient home had small devices which were very unpractical practical jokes, and from which everybody suffered at some time or another. It hit you on the head with its beams, and not only on the head. I had not been there a week when I stumbled backwards over one of the peculiar tiny steps which it kept in unexpected places. It was entirely my own fault!

I was going into the bathroom when I heard Mrs. Tabona coming up the stairs, talking to a male voice which I could not locate. Wishing to see everything that there was to be seen, which is a habit of mine, I stepped into the bathroom backwards, not seeing that there was one tiny step up. The next thing that happened was that I sat down so violently that the house must have shuddered, and the whole of my chassis was shaken. The old house, sick of hitting me on the head, had hit me where people ought to be hit!

It had however taken an unfair advantage, because my spine had suffered. I tried to faint, staggered back to my room, praying mutely that I did not meet anybody on the way, groped for Robbie's bottle of brandy which is kept for medicinal purposes only (his tipple is gin!), and had a good nip.

But talk about agony! You would not believe

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that anything so amusing could be so painful. Somebody lent me an air-cushion, which was an act of mercy, and ultimately I bought one for myself, and for three weeks sat with the most extreme caution, and even then showed little enthusiasm over rising. It wasn't easy going at all.

Anyway, Aunt Mabel's house would not do that on me.

We got everything packed, and there seemed to be a great deal of it, but, then, Robbie is a gift to any unfortunate woman when it comes to packing. He is the complete handyman about the house. I must say that the Navy does train its men to be admirable husbands. They say all the nice girls love a sailor, but all the wise ones ought to love them because they do make such magnificent husbands. Robbie packs like a brick. He takes off his coat, rolls up his sleeves, and starts in the most business-like manner. Everything fits in. There are no holes or chasms. The whole lot was finished so that we could have an early breakfast and get away at once. Every moment of daylight was so valuable at this time of year.

I had been thankful to get here, and now was equally thankful to get away. The village looney was ambling along with a pitchfork of hay on his shoulder; he stood amazed when he saw the car departing, even though we had said good-bye. Only yesterday he had insisted on accompanying me on one of my walks, and he had informed me that there was no place like Clare; he had been born here.

He'd die here too. So should I, if I had had to stay. Yet was it the place, or was it I? Hadn't I become so accustomed to town life that I simply could not bear the country any more? I think that

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was the truth of it, and if it were, then I should be no better off at Aunt Mabel's.

But we should never have the doctor pottering in with his amateur cinematograph again. We should never have to listen to any more chamber music. I supposed that in a few weeks the Army would absorb the guest-house entirely, but now I had got to the stage when honestly I did not care.

"We're off!" said Robbie.

I burst into the strains of the "Beer Barrel Polka."

XIV

I Arrive at Aunt Mabel's

WE had to cross England before nightfall, and these days it fell pretty early. Mercifully the traffic in London was so considerably lessened that it would not slow us down too much, and we could expect to skirt the centre, but Robbie reckoned that we ought to make a spurt while we had the chance. We went fast through the Cotswold villages, back through Banbury, and along that dimly dull road to Aylesbury. I do think that is the dullest road, because nothing ever happens on it. It is miles of barrenness, save in May, when there are very good yellow irises to be had for the picking there.

There is also one little bit of country nearly at Aylesbury known affectionately to Robbie and myself as 'the silly hedge.'

Quite often on a Sunday we have slipped out of town to have a peep at it and see how it is getting on, for the silly hedge is perfectly idiotic. It has never heard the buzz. It does absurd things; for instance, in February when every other hedge is stark, the silly hedge shows green. You can gather sprays and bring them into your house and believe that the Spring has already come. Now in early November, when the silly hedge should have been russet and drying it had not heard that buzz either. It was still as green as Spring. The trouble with it is that it is eccentric. It 'cannot conform to law and order. It likes to be different from its neighbours.

We stopped in Amersham at the inn for some

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coffee, and not daring to delay too long started for London again. I could not believe that I was actually travelling along the old familiar roads, seeing old landmarks which had not been bombed to perdition. "The Greyhound" at Chalfont St. Peter, where you can "stay for a meal or a month"; the Nervous Dogs kennels. The poultry farm at Denham, where we used to buy eggs on a Saturday. All old landmarks which had become extraordinary by the fact that they were still there.

The nearer I got to London, the more anxious I found myself becoming. It is very queer, but down in the country I had got out of the habit of thinking that there could be air raids, but the moment I neared London I got faintly windy. The balloons were not up. That looked to be a good omen, or didn't it?

We skirted London itself, and cut in on to the Sidcup bypass, which looked peculiarly barren, and again I was eager for the landmarks I had thought never to see again. The Sidcup bypass must be the most commercial road in England, just as the Aylesbury to Banbury road is the dullest. On the Sidcup bypass you can buy anything. You cannot pass a house which does not offer you tea as mother makes it, eggs, poultry, fresh fruit, home-made jam, coffee or accommodation for Bedford drivers, whatever they may be.

Though I once did meet some Bedford drivers. It was on that ill-fated holiday when the three of us, husband, self and son, went on a motor tour to Scotland. Leastways we started for Scotland, but at Grantham Robbie got rather ill. We had a dreadful trek on to York where he became so seedy that he had to go into the nicest nursing home that

I Arrive at Aunt Mabel's

I have ever met. For ten most miserable days my son and I were marooned in York, trotting to and fro between the home and the hotel, and in the afternoons, when Robbie was supposed to sleep, touring the countryside trying to see something of it.

York is in the middle of a plain. It has few sights inside it, save the Minster and the wall which goes on for ever, and the gateways. Outside, there seem to be no sights at all. We went over hills and dales, and moors and countryside, and it was one day coming back from one of these abortive expeditions that we were forced into a roadside tea-shanty where they usually accommodated Bedford drivers. In Yorkshire it is difficult to get anything to eat. Teas don't seem to exist, leastways not where I went. We had come to the awful moment when we had jolly well got to take the next place or starve; this was the next place and we might have done better starving.

I shall never again try the thing which is recommended as being a real Yorkshire tea, nor shall I pop in on the Bedford drivers. Incidentally, why do they only come from Bedford? I sat at an iron table outside the shack, in company with a couple of men in blue overalls, and although I have no prejudice against men in blue overalls, these were not quite the best sort. They chi-iked; they were playful; and the tea was a dickens of a time in coming. When it did arrive I could not muster it, strong and thick, and bitter, and the ham and eggs were not quite my line of country either.

The Sidcup bypass is disfigured by its commercial activities. It does not even barter in first-class commodities; it is a series of little tin shacks, and small bungalows, and they go on and on apparently

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for ever. At this time of the year however there was nothing to be bought save eggs, and chickens, and cabbages, though this did not deter them from keeping the notice-boards up in readiness for next year, if next year there was to be.

‘I shall not tell you where Aunt Mabel’s is, but it is in a little village tucked away in the flattest part of Kent. There is a small street with houses on both sides of it, a couple of shops, a church, and the usual Kentish ponds which seem to be attendant on all Kentish houses. We go there very often in the summer, but I had never tackled it in the winter before, and wondered how it would look.

We made good time, better than either of us had anticipated, and coming over Wrotham Hill I found that it definitely was very much warmer than it had been in the Cotswolds. We dropped down into the valley, stopping for a snack at the Moat Farm, and then on again.

Just as it was growing dusk we came into Hurst, and we saw Aunt Mabel’s home ahead. I was sure of a welcome.

Aunt Mabel has never married. She is the darlindest and sweetest person in this world, without one single shred of tact, and a passion for speaking the truth, which is a most distressing virtue. She is a very good woman, which does not make it easy to live with her. In her thirties she had had one unfortunate love affair with a parson, but he jilted her, or she detected him in a lie, I forget which it was. The story has been told me so often and it seems to change a lot in the telling, but anyway her romance ended and it was too late for her to marry anybody else.

She had a little money, and she toured about for a while not knowing quite where to settle. She was not

I Arrive at Aunt Mabel's

a success in a home of her own, she was not happy in boarding-houses, so she took up church work, and flung herself into it heart and soul and came to Hurst to live.

Ever since Aunt Mabel started this kind of work she has spent her time in charging round the village hooping up the unconfirmed and the unbaptized. She must be a thorn in the flesh to the parish priest. She attends all divine services, starting with it on the radio and carrying on with it all day. She is a pest because she cannot leave your soul alone, and has the most narrow-minded idea about never crossing the threshold of a public-house, but she is a darling for all that. You love her on sight, leastways I do. She is tall and angular, her piercing eyes read down into your very soul; you may be prepared to tell her a lie, but it goes West. It cannot find utterance before Aunt Mabel.

She came to this quiet farmhouse where she has lived ever since, and has, I think, found peace. It is a roomy old farm, with comfortable fires, and a bit of a frowst which is not unpleasant after God's fresh air in the Cotswolds. It stands back in a little garden, with the farm itself flowing behind it, and the sound of the cows and chickens coming in through the windows, and every now and then the loveliness of the mignonette in the front flower beds mingling with the varied whiffs of manure from the back buildings.

It is handy for the village hall where Aunt Mabel does good work; it is midway between that and the church, where she goes ostensibly to pray, but comes back with vivid descriptions of every hat in the parish. It also affords her an excellent vantage point because through the large bay window of her sitting-room she can keep a furtive eye on the portals of the

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"Jolly Waggoner," and can see which are the sinners who enter its doors. She likes that sort of thing, because it gives her the chance to go after them (not inside the "Jolly Waggoner" of course, she would be polluted by the beer and sawdust, but into their own homes, to tell them what she feels about it all).

Aunt Mabel may have her weak points; she is aggravating, she is difficult; but she is a good deal better than Mrs. Tabona, and, thank God, her doctor has not got a cinematograph.

At least, I think not.

I was thankful to see the farmhouse loom in sight, just the same, homely, friendly, composed, even the war had not been able to change that. Although it may be situated on the wrong side of England (undoubtedly Kent is much nearer to the German bombers than we had been in the West Country), the one point still stays good; clever as they may be, the Germans can't bomb everyone, and everywhere.

We turned in at the big gates beside the farm, and up the garden to the big barn at the top, where the cars are kept in company with the threshing machines, and the tedders, and the chicken food in sacks.

I had the sudden feeling that, after all, I was going to be happy. It was funny how far away the Cotswolds suddenly seemed to have gone.

XV

Life on the Farm

THE farm was kept by the Johnstones. He had been at the job as long as he could remember, practically born with his hands on the plough. Mrs. Johnstone was his amiable little wife, and war or no war, she refused to be fussed. Baking day was her major importance, and that they were really going to do dreadful things with the butter and sugar was the only matter that troubled her. Anyway, she said, she thanked God that she lived in the country where at least you could shoot a rabbit if it came to it and the butcher wasn't helpful. They had one son, known as my-son-Alec, large, yokelish, with a quiff, and apparently he accounted for the notice which I read over the doorway as we went in.

A.R.P. WARDEN

In I trailed into the pleasant warmth, and the blue atmosphere, for the chimney always smoked. Aunt Mabel came out of her room, and clasped me to her gaunt bosom and said that I was a poor lamb! Then she wafted us into the room where a meal had been set in readiness. It was a comfortable meal, cold pie, a fruit tart, cheese. There was the smell of hot coffee, got specially for me, I knew, because their tippie was cocoa.

Aunt Mabel wanted to hear all about it. She thought this was a disgraceful war, and, considering that she is so ardently a Christian woman, she struck

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me as being uncommonly bloodthirsty. She wanted to annihilate all Germans, lock, stock and barrel, and for ever.

"But surely," said I, "when it comes to a peace treaty you needn't scoffle the lot? Fifty years' compulsory castration would do that for you, and much more simply."

Although she lives on a farm, where the facts of life are displayed to her morning, noon and night outside the window, by over-sexed hens, and occasionally by larger animals in (I think) the most improper manner, Aunt Mabel still retains her virginally nice mind. Sex has never reared its ugly head under her merino combinations.

She said simply, "I don't know what that means."

To which the only reply that I could think of was, "Well, that's fine!"

Robbie came in with the luggage, the typewriters, the dressing-case, my workbasket, the portable wireless, the file, and the private waste-paper basket (because I can never get one away from home big enough to take all my rejections). He saw that I had said something that I shouldn't.

"What, have you two started squabbling already?" he asked.

Men will get that idea with women!

Now quite often when Robbie was in the Navy and took over a new appointment, he would remark the very first day how he told that awful-looking lieutenant what he thought of him. When people go about giving away bits of their mind, I have found that they are never the pleasanter bits. It strikes me that in this direction there is definitely one sauce for the goose and quite another one for the gander. A man can go about and be insulting to his

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boy friends, saying the most unspeakable things (you have only to be married to a naval officer to know the things that they can say), and they call it merely being frank. But if a woman makes a nice witty little remark to her lady friend, that's catty! Or squabbling. Or "For the Lord's sake, can't you women ever keep the peace?"

It is most unfair.

Robbie dragged the luggage upstairs, for my-son-Alec has a habit of making himself scarce on these occasions, and is very adept at it. I had been given the big room on the left of the stairhead, which runs out and over the porch, with one window on to the street, and another little one which looks out to the West and over the garden. There was a roasting wood fire, and somebody had already supplied me with a desk, which would be a real joy after trying to keep surplus papers in a dressing-case and everything always being at the bottom whenever I wanted it.

We came downstairs again to have our supper with Aunt Mabel.

Aunt Mabel was full of worry. It wasn't the war on the other side of the channel which disturbed her. I don't think she cared a couple of hoots what happened over there, her trouble was with the war at home. She maintained that people were not taking it seriously enough, and she had got a lot to say about the house over the way, where, she argued, they never darkened their lights properly. It was disgusting. There were great chinks of light showing, which she went to great pains to note. The name of the people was Macpherson; I had never heard of them, she said when I tried to look intelligent, and they weren't nice. They never attended any place

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of worship, which, if you ask me, was the main reason for her haggling over the lights so much.

She never kicked up the same dust about the doctor, who simply had no blind to his surgery at all; but he was a communicant, and a communicant can do no wrong in Aunt Mabel's eyes.

She escorted us to the window, and our own heavy dark blinds were drawn back to show us what a disgusting thing it was, and how much light was showing in the house opposite.

"But look at the light that we are showing in doing this," said Robbie.

Aunt Mabel did not think that mattered.

She had come to the conclusion that to-night the lights over the way were worse than ever, and something should be done about them, and at once. So she left her supper, to go and tell my-son-Alec that the Macphersons were disgraceful, and that he, as the head warden, ought to take some action, and immediately.

My-son-Alec said that it wasn't his job at all, it was a case for the police. Aunt Mabel was not deterred, and said she would hurry through her supper, and then go and see the policeman about it herself. It was obviously no good leaving work of such vital importance to other people. Robbie and I could not see why she need worry, but she was fostering some extraordinary idea that if a chink of light were showing, we all might die for it. And who were the Macphersons anyway to show their lights like that? They were strangers of an undesirable nature, who had had no right to come to live in the village at all.

However, I must say that this got rid of her, for off she bundled, in everything she had got, including a

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big coat of my-son-Alec's, and armed with gas mask and torch, and she trotted off to interview the policeman.

We sat on over the fire, and talked. It was almost like peace-time.

What a mercy to be free of the little pettiness of that guest-house, the pursuing ritual of that cinematograph, and silly old Graham fussed over a haunted room. It was certainly warmer here, and I could put up with a lot for that. In the Midlands, Robbie had even sunk as low as a hot-water bottle, which he always vowed he never would do. It doesn't go well with a naval officer, somehow, and they shy off them like the plague. It is funny the nice scruples men have. I would not care what was done or not done along that line, if it were pleasant and comfortable, and nobody can say that a hot-water bottle is not all that. But no, battleships do not provide them save in the Sick Bay. They provide everything else in the world; you would really be very surprised if you knew some of the queer things that they can provide. I personally have never come to an end of marvelling at them.

But here in Kent, hot-water bottles were no longer one of our vital needs, and, after all, Aunt Mabel was our own flesh and blood, and blood is thicker than water. I sat here trotting out all the old tags.

"I think you will be much happier, anyway," said Robbie. I knew I should be.

The next morning he went back to London.

XVI

Parochial Life

IT was a brilliant autumnal day when I looked out of the window above my desk. Robbie would not be back until to-morrow night again, and here it was not so convenient as Clare, because there was no station at all, and it entailed a bus trip from the little town. Mercifully there was a more or less suitable service.

I felt that Robbie ought to have applied for extra petrol, we deserved it, and it was directly in pursuance of his job that he wanted to use the car, though I suppose the voice of the Oracle would have asked why he could not stop in town, we had a perfectly good flat, furnished with damn-all, and that was where he ought to be. Which, on the face of it, does make sense, but the fact remains that in war a man does not wish his wife to fight in the trenches with him, and he does want to see her occasionally. Most of my friends had got their wives parked at all manner of queer spots about the country, and all of them hating the conditions like poison. I was getting pathetic letters by almost every mail.

After breakfast and three hours' work at my desk, I went downstairs to encounter Aunt Mabel, who had only just got up and was turning over copies of the parish magazine which she intended distributing later.

She had had a dreadful time with the policeman last night. At a rough guess he was getting tired of Aunt Mabel's repeated efforts to direct his attention towards the Macphersons' lights. Once or twice he

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had gone into their house and had haltingly reprimanded them, but it had not had the effect that could be desired. He explained pathetically that he could not keep on popping in and out and warning them, because it only meant that they 'got nasty.' Aunt Mabel thought that was no excuse at all, and merely the shirking of an obvious duty. She thought that, nasty or not nasty, they ought to be told off and made to hide the offending lights which were a definite danger to the entire neighbourhood.

She would do it herself if it came to it.

It was futile pointing out to her that she had better restrain herself, for she had no authority to behave in this fashion, and might get back as good as she gave, or even better. Aunt Mabel is the champion buttinski. She suggested that I should accompany her across the road to tell the Macphersons that they were a public danger. I said that I would do no such thing. I'd see her and the Macphersons somewhere else first, and anyway it was no business of mine. She maintained that it was my business, it was everybody's business, because our lives were being endangered by those lights. I'd look funny if I got bombed, and all through the Macphersons, said she.

You cannot argue with Aunt Mabel in that mood, so I said all right, she had better go across and tell all that to the Macphersons, and I'd curl up by the fire with a book.

She was gone a very long time.

Mrs. Johnstone brought me some coffee, and she told me that Aunt Mabel was always doing this sort of thing, people did not realize what a superlatively kind heart she had when she would 'carry on so.' She apparently wanted to do my son-Alec's job for

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him, and my-son-Alec was trying to keep a civil tongue in his head, but it was very hard for him at times. With which I agreed. We had not had Aunt Mabel in the family all these years without having a very good idea of what she was like.

In the midst of it, back she came, very red in the face, and very short of wind. She had had the most distressing scene in which I gathered that she had been worsted. She declared that the Macphersons were rude and mannerless.

She had so much to say and was so very vehement about it, that I thought it high time to take a constitutional. I put on my things and slipped out into the street.

"The modern woman has no sympathy," I heard her saying, and I had an idea that she was referring to me.

Just outside our own gate, an awkward thing happened. Mrs. Macpherson had come out of her house, and was standing there superintending the clipping of the hedge by her son. He was a stalwart young man, with humoursome dark eyes, and as I drew level I heard Mrs. Macpherson say, very tartly indeed, "She is the most dreadful woman, and as if our cups were not full already, now there is another of them with her."

Which I gathered alluded to myself.

You cannot start living in a village community by having a row with the people opposite. I came to a standstill. I said, "Look here, I don't need blaming, I need sympathy. You've only had my Aunt Mabel on your hands for a year, whereas I've had her all my life. And perhaps the worst part of it all is that she means so well."

Mrs. Macpherson went rather white; then, because

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she was an intelligent woman, she saw that I was talking sense, and she said, "I am afraid that I was hasty, but your aunt does rumple me up the wrong way," which I knew was true.

She introduced me to her son Colin, and in the end we got on so well that she took me inside the house, which was one of those lovely Kentish houses, and I never got my walk at all.

It struck me that the Macphersons were exceedingly nice people, rubbed up the wrong way by Aunt Mabel of course, and that I liked them, which was not going to be very helpful, because nothing in this world would ever make her like them. She is biassed against their religious attitude first of all, and secondly by their lights. Also there is the fact that they are strangers, and therefore could not be admitted to any sacred circle in the parish.

I got back late for lunch.

"And now what?" asked Aunt Mabel, who had now rumbled something and fixed me with that horny eye of hers which sees everything.

It is useless to tell her a lie. She knows it instinctively; she has a suspicious mind and believes that a lie is there when you are actually speaking the truth.

I tried to explain that I thought the Macphersons were quite amiable people who meant no harm, but had unfortunately ill-fitting curtains. Not long ago Aunt Mabel had made up her mind that they were German spies who had come to the village with the deliberate intention of giving the enemy the road to London. Nothing was going to shake her in this belief, which made me very angry.

We lunched in a strained atmosphere, which however had cleared itself by tea, which we ate together, toasting hot muffins by the fire, and discussing

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the parish magazine which I thought a very poor production.

Hurst is wholly self-contained, and like all these little country places very much occupied with itself. The doctor is a bachelor; there is much speculation as to whom he will wed, because of course he will have to marry one of them, for they think that an unmarried doctor is hardly respectable. Recently he was made a sidesman, which meant the final cachet to village society. As the other sidesmen are the blacksmith, who is handy with a promiscuous gun 'of a Sunday,' and prides himself that his family live on game all the year round whereas gentry conform to a close season; the manager of the pig farm, who bets; and the man who runs the baker's shop, which is haberdashery one side and goes in for a bit of fruit at Christmas as well; I cannot see that this cachet goes very far.

The doctor causes speculation in all quarters, especially in Aunt Mabel's, because she always likes 'tō get people settled for life in some capacity or another, no matter what their personal feelings on the matter may be.

There is the Vicar, a youngish man, with a fat, jolly wife, who doesn't like Aunt Mabel any more than I should if I were in her position. What Aunt Mabel seems to forget in her ardent pursuit of clerics is that their wives may misinterpret her motives, which are always singularly pure, though it is impossible that the wives should know this.

I met Mrs. H. (the Vicar's wife) at the working party into which I was inveigled. It met during the following week, and I was beguiled along to take up my knitting-pins on active service. I could not have stood the ostracism which would have attended my staying away. Anyhow, it was something to do.

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It was held in the parish hall, an obnoxious building of corrugated tin, with a very pregnant-looking boiler and a heat which would have vied with the Sahara and then had a good chance of winning the competition.

Inside, there was the usual collection of village ladies, those with noses like beaks, others with snubs; little round tubs of women; gaunt, angular, vulture-like women; and mostly past their meridian. The whole village seemed to be past its meridian, but all so kind-hearted.

You never saw such hats. I had long ago given up wearing a hat at all, because my London gear was so unsuitable, and I had found that the ordinary beret of commerce is antagonistic to the Edwardian coiffure. So I turned up as Heaven made me, and when I saw the hats I should have had to compete with I felt immensely relieved. There were strange shingles and bobs, and whiskers on the backs of necks, and more pince-nez than I could have believed possible.

Mrs. H. was seated at the head of the table, to do the reading, and the book which she was reading aloud was *Mein Kampf*, which I thought most unsuitable. Her idea was that everybody ought to read it just to prove to them that Adolf Hitler was mad, but most of them had no idea what it was all about so could not prove anything. The woman next to me, who had not listened to a word, had thought that it was a book on camping, which never had interested her, because she thought it made you so cold!

We were seated on either side of the long trestle-table, and I was doled out with some khaki wool and instructed to cast on seventy-five stitches and start a scarf. Knit 4, p. 4, for ten rows, then knit 2, p. 2, for

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the rest. The instructions were on printed slips stuck before us.

Aunt Mabel has knitted several scarves, which I do think is good of her, because she loathes knitting. She had grey wool, and sat there, her mouth buttoned up. (she does not approve of *Mein Kampf*), knitting away like blazes.

I found it very monotonous sitting there for an hour listening to the droning voice, and the clicking of the pins, and wondering if I could possibly bring stink bombs with me next time, and see what sort of a difference they made to *Mein Kampf*.

At the end of an hour, one of the ladies, who looked like a frog in both face and figure, went into the annexe and made tea in an enormous urn which was brought round, and we all paid three-halfpence for a cup of tea, and a penny extra if we wanted a biscuit. The profits went to the Red Cross, but there had not been any profits so far, because the biscuits worked out at too much. We all chatted over the cup that cheers.

Looking up, I noticed that Aunt Mabel was becoming deeply engrossed in a conversation, which is always a bad sign with her, so I listened in. It seemed that some people who lived at an outlying farm had got an evacuated woman there. Mrs. Huggins and her little son Hughie Huggins were with her. This couple badly wanted to move into a billet inside the village, because it was too far for little Hughie to attend school, which he ought to be doing. This is just the sort of opportunity that Aunt Mabel never misses. She revels in doing good turns, though very often her turns are on the same principle as the boy scout who did his day's good deed by giving the canary to the cat.

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Now she remarked at once that there was an extra room lying idle at the Johnstones' farm, and she was sure that they would love to have this occupied. Besides, it was their duty, said she, everybody ought to do what they could for the nation in its emergency. She would ask them about it directly she got home.

It struck me that the woman with whom Mrs. Huggins and her little Hughie were lodging seemed to be very anxious about this, and most grateful to Aunt Mabel, so that I wondered if there might not be a catch in it. Anyway, I did not suppose the Johnstones would thank my aunt for letting their extra spare room for them, but when I murmured this to her, she said that it would be quite all right. They made spare money that way, and of course it was their duty.

We did another hour's intensive knitting, and the blackout was coped with, after which Mr. H. came in to say a few words of benediction. He stood at the end of the table, looking remarkably uneasy, and told us how badly the knitting was wanted, and gave us a little humorous story at which we all laughed immoderately, and then we had a prayer. It was discovered that there was a portable harmonium at the far end of the room, one of the kind that you play on all fours, and Aunt Mabel obliged on this, whilst we all sang the Vesper Hymn.

What all this was to do with the knitting I have not the foggiest idea, but it was all part and parcel of the proceedings, because nobody expressed any surprise at it.

We all broke up and shook hands with Mr. and Mrs. H. and were then bundled out into the most intensive blackout, armed with very small torches. I must say that Hurst had done its job remarkably

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well, and was even worse than the Cotswolds, because there seemed to be no footpath at all at the edge of the road, and I should have thought that some of us were bound to get run over before we got home.

They organized the procession on a principle of their own, born of necessity. You simply held on to the belt of the woman in front of you, and staggered along like that, in one immense crocodile. Belted coats were still all the mode in Hurst, which was fortunate.

Finally we came adrift outside the Johnstones' front gate, and Aunt Mabel and I went inside to our supper. She was as good as her word, and she tackled Mrs. Johnstone about the problem of the Huggins's at once, saying that it was undoubtedly her duty, and a few other pointed remarks of a similar nature.

Mrs. Johnstone did not seem to be stirred by ~~keenness~~ towards her duty to the nation, but of course nobody in this world could stand up to one of Aunt Mabel's tank attacks, and this was an intense one. Before she sat down to her supper with me, she had fixed the whole thing up, and in case Mrs. Johnstone should change her mind, had sent word by the milkman to the outlying farm.

"It is one's duty to be business-like," said Aunt Mabel, having finally settled it and coming into the sitting-room to divest herself of a suède lumber-jacket, and settle down to the evening meal.

I thought that Mrs. Johnstone was not happy about this and was convinced that she did not want evacuees here, though if it came to it, I admit that I was one but then I paid for my keep in the ordinary way whereas Mrs. Huggins and Hughie would be on the Government allowance, and Mrs. Johnstone explained

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weakly that some of the children were "ever so troublesome, and they were a bit old for that sort of thing." I agreed. Aunt Mabel was bursting with goodwill, and thought that all children could be managed if you went the right way to work, which is just the sort of thing an old maid would think, for they foster the most optimistic ideas about the very young.

After supper I made silly excuses and slipped across the road to the Macphersons. The working-party had been a bit much and I deserved a breather. I had already made firm friends with the Macphersons, which was clever of me, I think, because Aunt Mabel was still of the opinion that they must be German spies, and would bring the wrath of Hitler into our midst. As I went across the road, I saw that the lights were showing again, and before I had been there an hour, the sergeant came across and said that "the lady over the way had been complaining again."

There was a lot of blame attached to that silly policeman, if you ask me. He was not taking the thing seriously. He insisted to Mrs. Macpherson that he did not care what lights showed, he thought it was all just a rare piece of nonsense, and there wouldn't be no air raids, but it was Aunt Mabel who kept on to him.

"You see what your aunt is like," said Colin bitterly.

I explained that I knew her of old, and what was more had spent a solid afternoon with her at a working-party (I had noticed that his mother was absent), and that she had managed to hitch a couple of extra evacuees into our house during the tea interval. Colin said that the working party was awful, and why not come to the cinema, which was four miles off, because surely I needed a change?

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well, and was even worse than the Cotswolds, because there seemed to be no footpath at all at the edge of the road, and I should have thought that some of us were bound to get run over before we got home.

They organized the procession on a principle of their own, born of necessity. You simply held on to the belt of the woman in front of you, and staggered along like that, in one immense crocodile. Belted coats were still all the mode in Hurst, which was fortunate.

Finally we came adrift outside the Johnstones' front gate, and Aunt Mabel and I went inside to our supper. She was as good as her word, and she tackled Mrs. Johnstone about the problem of the Huggins's at once, saying that it was undoubtedly her duty, and a few other pointed remarks of a similar nature.

Mrs. Johnstone did not seem to be stirred by ~~keenness~~ towards her duty to the nation, but of course nobody in this world could stand up to one of Aunt Mabel's tank attacks, and this was an intense one. Before she sat down to her supper with me, she had fixed the whole thing up, and in case Mrs. Johnstone should change her mind, had sent word by the milkman to the outlying farm.

"It is one's duty to be business-like," said Aunt Mabel, having finally settled it and coming into the sitting-room to divest herself of a suède lumber-jacket, and settle down to the evening meal.

I thought that Mrs. Johnstone was not happy about this and was convinced that she did not want evacuees here, though if it came to it, I admit that I was one; but then I paid for my keep in the ordinary way, whereas Mrs. Huggins and Hughie would be on the Government allowance, and Mrs. Johnstone explained

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weakly that some of the children were "ever so troublesome, and they were a bit old for that sort of thing." I agreed. Aunt Mabel was bursting with goodwill, and thought that all children could be managed if you went the right way to work, which is just the sort of thing an old maid would think, for they foster the most optimistic ideas about the very young.

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Heaven knows I did!

Vehicles were the trouble, but he explained that he and my-son-Alec often went over to the pictures, and although there was no bicycle for me, they could fix me up if only I would consent to be fixed up. It was a little lane along which there was not much traffic, and anyway what was four miles?

The idea of the cinema was so charming that without thinking I consented. An evening out was the one thing that I fancied beyond all others, and I said that if they could fix me up, of course I'd come. Was I not sporting anyway? But I stipulated that I was not riding on anybody's step for anything, because I know what your legs feel like at that game, and the man in front keeps on grumbling about your weight, and you at the back feel like dropping from exhaustion. I've had some of that.

He said oh no, they had often taken people into the cinema sitting in the hand-cart, which was the one in which they took vegetables in to market. I was a trifle startled. The hand-cart sounded to me much like the hand bier, and that is what it nearly became.

I did not tell Aunt Mabel that I should be late, I had merely informed her that I was going across to the Macs. for a bit, which brought a sniff, and a look, but in her heart she is a bit afraid of me, and it is not always that she dare say all the impolite things that she is thinking.

Outside the gate Colin and my-son-Alec met me on their bicycles, with very dimmed lights. To these bicycles they had attached a two-wheeled hand-cart fitted with a long handle. The idea was that they held on to the handle, whilst I perched myself on a very slippery sloping surface, and waggled a subdued

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bicycle lamp over the back which acted as a rear lamp, and kept off any overtaking traffic.

"But I can't," said I, staring in fascinated horror at the hand-cart.

All ideas of sportiness were fast leaving me.

They said that was nonsense, because other people had done it most successfully and it was a great deal easier than it looked. My-son-Alec invited me to hop on to it.

Much against my better judgment, I was persuaded to get on to the hand-cart, clinging with one arm to the base of the handle, and waggling the subdued bicycle lamp with the other. It was a most shocking experience. The hand-cart invariably overtook the bicycles going downhill, which put us all into imminent peril; uphill it lagged behind, and I could hear hard breathing going on, and felt most ashamed. I tried to make myself lighter by breathing with them, or holding my breath, but without success, because I could not remember which of these is supposed to do it. I'm heavier than I look. I carry my weight in my hams. I know it sounds vulgar but it is most unfortunately true. My weight does not show, because I choose my skirts with discretion, but my hams have been a constant source of trouble to me, and I think they must have been a considerable trouble to Colin and my-son-Alec, as they puffed up the hills.

When we got nearer to the little town where there was a cinema, I became so horrified as to traffic that I could not bother about weightiness and any upset that it might cause these young men. Cars coming up to us seemed to be petrified at the strange appearance of this odd conveyance. They boggled at the waggled bicycle lamp, even though it was subdued. I saw faces peering at me. I could do nothing.

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It took every ounce of energy that I had got to keep hold of the hand-cart and the bicycle lamp at one and the same time.

Are the pictures worth it?

Definitely no.

When we parked our equipage in the car park and went into the cinema itself the programme was dreadful. Also it went on for a good deal longer than I had anticipated. I felt tired out, and I got that nasty little-girl feeling inside me that there was Aunt Mabel to be reckoned with. She would want an explanation and I could not see her waxing enthusiastic about my adventures on a hand-cart. I did not even know how I could begin to tell her, because the whole story sounded so unconvincing.

There was also the trip back. Most unfortunately one of the pictures had a plot which came far too near home to be pleasant. It was all to do with an S O S call on the wireless.

"There was an accident at the corner of Holy Lane, when a pedal cyclist collided with a saloon car and received injuries which have since proved fatal. . . ."

Listening to it, it dawned on me that it would be quite possible for me to receive injuries which would subsequently prove fatal on my return journey sitting on that beastly hand-cart, wobbling a dimmed bicycle lamp.

I must have been crazy to attempt such a silly jaunt. I'd try to hire a car to get home. That I found to be out of the question.

I said, "I'll walk home."

"Bosh," said they, "we've got to get the hand-cart back anyway, so you had better sit on it and not make a fuss."

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I still had the remains of the most uncomfortable stitch in my side which had come from the extraordinary position that I had had to assume. I could not bear the thought of another four miles' return journey with that stitch, and possible injuries which might subsequently prove fatal.

"I like exercise," I lied valiantly, because I am one of those people who hate exercise, and would never stir a hand if I could help it.

The young men would not let me out of it.

Eventually we left the cinema and went into the pub. alongside, where they had 'one for the road' and I had a hot coffee, which seemed to stagger the barmaid more than if I had asked for a barrel. And all the time the absurd words kept rotating through my mind, "and received injuries which have since proved fatal."

I am too old for trips on hard hand-carts, too stiff in the joints, and the hams which weigh a ton suffer for it. I ached all over. We started on that melancholy journey back, and as we approached Hurst, and came flying down the hill, I thought to my doom, I had reached the stage when I almost prayed for injuries which would subsequently prove fatal! I had got as far as that.

As we entered the village, my numbed fingers lost hold of the bicycle lamp, which we lost because it was so dark; there was no hope of getting the beastly thing back, but who cared?

As I entered the farm again with my-son-Alec, which was a major mistake and one that I should have known better than to make, I found Aunt Mabel swooping out of her room looking furious. What was worse, Mrs. Johnstone had come over all maternal, and thought that her boy was getting

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attached to a married woman who, in addition to being married, wrote books, and therefore must be loose.

I'm getting used to country-folk considering me loose, whereas in reality I am quite strait-laced. If they thought there had been the chance of any promiscuousness on that infernal hand-cart, they were quite wrong. I am neither loose, nor an acrobat, and one would have had to be both.

There was a silence with Aunt Mabel which was noticeable, and lasted not only that night, but the whole of the next day, and I detected a definite coolness on the part of Mrs. Johnstone, which was regrettable.

I must be more careful.

I am too old to jaunt about on hand-carts, and it was only an act of providence that I had not sustained injuries which since proved fatal. I must conform more reasonably to village regulations.

XVII

The Gipsies

AT this particular moment a publisher, became interested in the outline of a book, this book to be exact. He announced, that he would like to purchase it, but a speedy publication was necessary, as it 'dated.' Therefore could I swear to deliver the goods within a set time?

I telephoned back that I could.

This telephone conversation took place in the hall of the farm, which is a small square, over-furnished with Mr. Johnstone's farm coat, my-son-Alec's couple of macks, the decontamination outfit which is part of his kit, Aunt Mabel's shopping basket, and Mrs. Johnstone's best hat and mantle. Leastways I suppose that you would call it a mantle, it has that sort of look about it, and certainly is not a coat.

Telephonic conversation can be overheard by the entire house, which although it stoutly professes that it has no shadow of interest in the chat, stolidly listens-in just the same.

The moment that I had finished, and went back into Aunt Mabel's room, where we had been going through that dreadful ritual known as "doing up the parish magazines," she challenged me.

"What was that about?" she asked.

I told her.

To this day Aunt Mabel thinks it peculiar that anybody should want to buy my books, but consoles herself with the thought that probably you can sell any rubbish if only you try hard enough. When I

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told her a little about it, she said that it was of course impossible for me to write a book of that length in that short space of time. I said that it would be quite possible, provided that people had the goodness to let me alone and give me the chance to get on with the work.

"Oh," said Aunt Mabel.

I could see that wasn't suiting her, and eventually, after a little beating about the bush, she decided that it was her duty to be frank, and out it came.

She was organizing an entertainment for the Red Cross, which was to take place early in December when people had that Christmas spirit, and their club money had come in. She thought that I could make myself useful in a good cause, after all it was one's duty, wasn't it? I ignored that suggestion, and asked how she had supposed I could be useful.

She replied that I could write them a little sketch, nothing much of course, it really would not take me very long; it must be something that included a part for Mrs. Cobb, who always got angry if she wasn't in it, and they had a good shepherd's smock that they would like to utilize, and my great-grandfather's wedding waistcoat. It seemed a pity to have these things put by and not to make use of them, she said, and no doubt I could write something amusing and gay (though 'not too gay,' she warned me with a severe look in her eye) which would include all these.

"Something," said I, "which brings in Mrs. Cobb, a shepherd boy, and my great-grandfather's wedding waistcoat? Is anybody to be inside the wedding waistcoat, or is it to be a ghost?"

She thought that I was being facetious.

I said, "It's a bit of a tall order, you know."

She did not think so. After all, if you wrote, you

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wrote, and nothing should come amiss. It should make it almost easier when somebody gave you something to work upon, though I really felt that Mrs. Cobb, the smock and my great-grandfather's wedding waistcoat were hardly the outline of a plot.

Then Aunt Mabel remembered that in my youth I had played the piano. I had in fact had to work at it very hard indeed for a couple of years, when my only source of revenue was the playing of a piano in a cinema for the remuneration of 30s. per week, fourpence deducted for insurance stamp! There had been no afternoons off, and no breathing spaces. It was very hard work indeed, and at the time Aunt Mabel had considered it disgraceful that I should demean myself to do such a thing, though now she produced it, and twisted it round to suit her own ideas.

Would it not be nice, said she, warming to her work, if I played the accompaniments and then gave a hand with the trio?

I knew promptly that she must have remembered that I had had to write band parts out for a small and very miscellaneous orchestra which helped us when we had what is known as a 'big' picture. I realized that something awe-inspiring was coming.

"What," I asked, "is the trio?"

Aunt Mabel was now warming to her work in the fantastic belief that I was becoming amenable. Mrs. Sanders played the viola, and Mrs. H. was quite good on the fiddle. On gala occasions, they got Mrs. Cobb to bring along her 'cello. I could see that the unknown Mrs. Cobb was fast becoming a menace.

"Surely," said I, "my arithmetic is wrong, or that

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is a quartette? If it is to be a trio, they won't want me."

She had not thought of that one, and now assumed the expression of a weary woman about to reason with an obstinate child. Somebody had got to write out the music for these people, said she, and after all it wasn't much to do. It wasn't as though you had got to invent it, it was only copying. They were only wanting simple stuff. "The Blue Danube," "Dvorák's Humoresque," and the "Indian Love Lyrics."

I might have guessed as much.

"What," I asked, "has the poor old 'Monastery Garden' done to be left out of it, I'd like to know?"

Aunt Mabel had a lot to say.

I think she had looked upon me as Heaven's gift to a quiet village, and the chance for launching some of her worst efforts. She glories in getting up things. I could imagine her going round the parish and saying, "My niece will play. My niece is very good at this sort of thing," and before we knew where we were, this was the painful result.

"You will help?" she begged.

I said that I would help, but I was not writing any sketches for Mrs. Cobb, the shepherd's smock, and my great-grandfather's wedding waistcoat; nor was I writing out the "Blue Danube," etc., into band parts for three women to crawl up and down stringed instruments. If I undertook to do anything I must have some licence about it, and must do it my own way.

I saw that she considered I was being unkind, and she was hurt. In a war, she explained, it was a national duty, everybody's duty, to do what one could for the troops.

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Red Cross, I corrected her.

She became tearful, and it ended by my promising to do what I could, which was very annoying, because this book was already on my hands, and I foresaw that Mrs. Cobb would probably be a pest, and it would not be easy to write any sketch which would accommodate the three items mentioned.

There were lovely walks in Kent, and I went out for one. The plainness of the Cotswolds, with seven miles to anywhere, and then nowhere much, was finished, and although this was a plain also, there were villages dotted about it, so that one could walk to a definite place. The hair did not present the same problem, because I could go by bus to the town when I wanted, and although the hairdresser there was as indifferent as all these provincial people seemed to be, he was a hairdresser of sorts.

In the village here I never had the same sense of desolation, that same aloneness, even though I might have feelings of resentment. I was never at a loose end, for if I slacked off, Aunt Mabel could always find me a job.

Every Saturday we did the flowers in the church. Every Sunday she fished gallantly for me to help her with the Sunday-school. But I don't hold with Sunday-school; let the poor little things have a rest, say I. At eleven years old I had to teach our class at home; fourteen miserable little boys and girls of much too diverse ages so that they defied any organization. Every day in the week the poor little brutes went to school, and on a Sunday afternoon they were parked on me for the good of their little souls. I read them fairy-tales, and taught them hunting songs. I remembered there was a fuss about it the Sunday that my papa was stirred from his

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afternoon siesta by the strain of infant voices bawling, "A-hunting we will go," from the kitchen, whilst I accompanied them on the little all-fours harmonium.

All the same my Sunday-school was a wild success, though it had nothing Sunday or school about it, which was probably the reason. It was a good old sing-song.

Naturally Aunt Mabel did not take her Sunday-school that way. She started with the collect, digested the epistle and gospel, said a prayer, and closed with a hymn. I was not going to be a party to this refined form of torture, even though her class was overflowing with evacuated children, who, she said, were positive little heathens, and I just ought to see all that she had to go through.

I have my writing, I told her.

It was all wrong on the Lord's Day. On the Lord's Day nobody ought to raise a finger for that kind of thing, said she, but the Lord's Day happens to be the one whereon I usually get the most inspiration, and I sat over the log fire in my bedroom, typing away quite happily whilst she instructed the children in the way that they should go. Why should I help them to a permanent dislike of religion, anyway?

Monday it was usually suggested that I went out district-visiting. Tuesday she got busy with her clubs, Christmas club, clothing club, and all the rest of her charitable occupations. Wednesday and Friday were working-party days, and I saw to my horror that carol practice would be fast approaching. We should all be trilling "Good King Wenceslas" together, and that would be very trying for all parties concerned.

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I have my book which must be written, said I firmly.

"Your book could wait. God cannot wait," she told me.

"She means well, but she has got such rum ideas," said my-son-Alec, trying to be sympathetic.

I think that he got very fed-up with her at times, and of course the Macphersons over the way breathed fire. I had decided that my sportiness with my-son-Alec and Colin Mac. must end. I had not repeated the expedition on the hand-cart, because I daren't.

One evening, when I had finished my meal and, missing Aunt Mabel, was going upstairs to my room to write, I saw her bedroom door open, and to my amazement she was in there with a man. I could not believe that all my preconceived ideas of her behaviour were suddenly to go by the board, and naturally I looked closer into this.

It was the policeman.

He looked sheepish, and seemed to be edging towards the door, but Aunt Mabel was insistent that he should not go away but should come further inside. I went in myself, and the policeman seemed to be most relieved to see me. I saw what was afoot. It was the Macphersons' lights again. Aunt Mabel had had the policeman in' about them, and because he had expressed the revolutionary opinion that there really wasn't much showing as seen from downstairs, she had, in her indignation, dragged him upstairs to show him the frightful sight which would direct enemy aircraft Londonwards. He stood there tugging at his moustache, and staring helplessly at her.

I said, "Really, Aunt Mabel!" and I suppose she then appreciated that there were some who might misconstrue her intentions.

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She went very red.

The policeman (who looked undignified without a helmet; the difference this makes to any self-respecting policeman is tremendous) went downstairs in high dudgeon. I thought that he was getting more than a bit sick of my Aunt Mabel.

"He doesn't understand the seriousness of it all," said she, "and I think he gets angry. Ought I to give him a cup of cocoa, do you suppose?"

I had an idea that he might throw the cup of cocoa at her, but knowing her reaction to the suggestion of a glass of beer, refrained from saying anything.

"You really ought to learn to leave people alone," I said.

The arrangements were now complete for Mrs. Huggins and little Hughie to move from the outlying farm into our bedroom. Aunt Mabel had officiated heavily in this matter, never sparing herself, but I thought that the Johnstones showed some reluctance. Mr. Johnstone commented that he had had enough of children; they always fell foul of the chaff-cutter, they saw things that "wasn't good for them to see on the farm," and what was more they asked "ak'kard questions." Aunt Mabel, not knowing the answers to these awkward questions, can sail obliviously through any number of such emergencies, but they react on other people rather grimly, and poor Mr. Johnstone knew this to his cost.

The undesirability of further boarders would never have halted Aunt Mabel in doing what she considered to be her duty, and she felt that she was doing somebody a good turn on this occasion, because there was a small amount of money to be collected from the deaf postmistress, who sold stamps on one side of her front parlour, and the yellowest haddocks you ever

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saw on the other. The Johnstones ought to be pleased, maintained Aunt Mabel, but I knew quite well that wasn't their attitude of mind at all.

I avoided Aunt Mabel on the morning Mrs. Huggins arrived. It was really the day for doing the flowers at the church, and she had been promised some chrysanthemums from the doctor's garden, so I saw her tripping along in her lumberjack's suede coat, and hurriedly went the other way by the poultry farm to the West.

In late November even the best poultry farms are inclined to be dull. I walked over the hill and met Colin Mac. on horseback, looking very smart. He suggested that I got a horse (there was one that he could get for me, called Buttercup, or something floral), and he thought that it would be grand if we went for gallops together. Now I can think of nothing that is less appealing to me. I am not horsey. I hate them. I admit that in my extreme youth I rode a carthorse with a back as wide as grandma's old chest, and that, when it got sick of me, it walked under the trees and left me hanging by the hair of my head, like Absalom. I admit that later in my life, in the indiscreet twenties, I wanted to go riding with a small son who adored a sheltie called Daisy, an indiscriminate pony, who used to walk into the kitchen for apples and sugar, and was more like a dog than a horse. I did have one riding lesson (only one, mark you!), a ghastly experience perched on a leggy grey mare called Queenie. I nearly expired.

"I hate horses," I told Colin.

It is sinful to hate horses in the country; it is almost as bad as not drinking beer, or being unable to throw a pretty dart.

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"But you can't possibly hate horses?" said he, and I knew that he was disappointed in me. However, he must not foster any illusions on that score.

"Can't hate horses?" I asked. "Watch me!"

"I'll teach you to love them," was the next quite foolish suggestion.

I got out of that adroitly. I had no kit. My old navy slacks, which I only wear on country walks, I dare not put on because I knew what Aunt Mabel would think and have to say about them. Riding-breeches are not my style; it's my hams again, as I explained. Colin said that he was quite sure that my hams were genteel, which merely shows that he is unobservant or untruthful, I hate to think which.

I am not alone in this difficulty, for nine women out of ten would never wear trousers if only they bought themselves a couple of mirrors and saw their views fore and aft. It is the aft that is so unnerving!

"If you really feel like that about them," said Colin, "well, it can't be helped, though it beats me how an intelligent woman could be so foolish."

I continued my walk.

I went down to the river; it was damp and muddy, and women's shoes are made badly to cope with such difficulties. I came back across a field of lapwings, and through a little stark wood, my feet sopping. "Still, I'm glad you had a jolly walk," said Aunt Mabel pointedly when I did get home. Then I remembered that I ought to have helped with the doctor's chrysanthemums.

Ever since my evacuation I have been unable to find a jolly walk. Jolly walks are associated to me with lovely summer days, when you can tramp across pleasant fields; or early autumn days, when there is no cold wind to bite your ears off, and it is easy

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going. Now the trees were almost leafless, the mud harassed one (it had been a very damp autumn), and there literally seemed to be nowhere to go., I could go to the post office for either stamps or haddocks, or I could assist in the delivery of those infernal parish magazines which were for ever cluttering up Aunt Mabel's sitting-room.

There was the walk to the river, or to the village with the pig farm on the top of the little hill; or to the gipsies. I found the gipsies on my second morning, and they interested me. They had a small encampment with four caravans, and a dingy-looking hut, just outside the village.

Aunt Mabel disapproved of them; she was horrified that I should have demeaned myself by getting to know them. In truth I had not intended stopping, but a young woman with a baby tied to her person by a russet shawl rushed out and told me that I had a lucky face! My lucky face may be lucky to them, but it is singularly unlucky to me. She wanted to tell my fortune, and in exchange for a shilling told me that soon I should marry a handsome dark stranger who had a fortune, and after that I should travel a great deal overseas.

This, hot on the news of the magnetic mines, horrified me. "God forbid!" said I.

Unfortunately once you have met the gipsies, they cannot be shaken off. They are positive leeches and I ought not to have encouraged them. Whenever I went out I met one or other of them and was always greeted by smiles, and pattering feet which continued alongside my own like the amiable lunatic at Clare. I could not shake them off, and they always had a tale of woe to tell. These were hard times, said the gipsy, the baby was hungry; she herself found the

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When I got back to the farm, it was in a ferment, because of Hughie and Mrs. Huggins. They were all much too busy to notice my early and unenthusiastic return. By this time I had decided to hold my peace about the incident, but this good resolution was not to last me very long, for Aunt Mabel came running up to my room.

"I haven't any change," said she, "and there is two shillings wanted to pay for the Huggins' cab from the farm."

"I haven't any change."

"I can get the man to change a note for you, do please lend it me because I am very short, and it looks so bad."

"I haven't a note," said I.

Aunt Mabel saw that something was up, because I am one of those meticulous people who always keep change by them. She has a cruelly suspicious mind which jumps at the right conclusions with startling suddenness.

"You haven't had your purse stolen?" she demanded, "now answer me. Don't you dare to lie to me!"

"I should never think of lying to you," said I coldly, spurning my original idea of telling a good one and sticking to it. "I have lost my purse."

"Then it was those gipsies, I'll be bound. I am quite sure that they have picked your pocket?"

"So am I," I said.

Truth is always defeating. She seemed most surprised that I did not contradict her.

"When on earth did this happen?"

I told her the bald and naked truth, even if she didn't like it. I had been stopped as usual by the gipsy encampment, and the young woman had wanted

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to tell me the story of her life, and the story of my own future life. She had been joined by her two girl friends. When I left it had seemed that my lucky face was my undoing, because my purse had gone.

"I'll see to that," said Aunt Mabel.

I begged her to do nothing of the sort. I would go to the village policeman and he would deal with this.

"Rubbish!" said Aunt Mabel, putting on her hat, a feathered contraption like a tea-cosy with wings. "Haven't you realized that man's a fool?"

I had.

"You had better come with me," said she.

I jibbed at that, for there are some things that I cannot bear. Nothing would induce me to tackle an entire gipsy encampment, even though I might be backed up by Aunt Mabel, who, I was obliged to admit, was as good as four village policemen. I would not go with her. I hate brawls, and am only too well aware of her capabilities in this direction. "I'd rather lose the money," said I.

"You can't do that," she announced.

She seemed to think that I was being singularly unkind seeing that it was only in my defence that she was going at all, but that argument had lost its power with me. She loves a row. There is nothing that Aunt Mabel likes better than a real old scene, and although she will tell you that arguments give her palpitation, and that she hates having a fuss, secretly she adores them.

In the end she flounced off without me, and I was just in time to see the altercation with Mrs. Huggins coming up the stairs with Hughie. Mrs. Huggins was a small woman, thin, but rather puddingy in the figure, with a tired, drawn little face which looked rather bad-tempered. Hughie was a thin child too,

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with hatchet features and small blue eyes. He had a shock of unmanageable red hair and was a most unprepossessing person.

"I don't like it, Mam," he was bawling.

"You come along or I'll slap your bottom for you," said Mrs. Huggins with no affection at all.

Hughie hung on to one banister and raised a raucous voice in protest. I felt that the banister might give before Hughie did, and not wishing to be detected in the crime of eavesdropping, went into my room and tried to compose myself to write an article for an evening paper. My agent had telephoned me at midday saying that he wanted this article at once. It was one thousand words on woman's work in the war.

Outside my door Hughie's yells continued, interspersed with the most frightful threats from Mrs. Huggins.

"I shan't do it, Mam."

"You come on or I'll give you one over the ear-hole."

"I shan't."

"You wait till I get you upstairs!"

"I don't care, I shan't do it."

How can a woman write under such conditions?

In a few minutes Aunt Mabel would be back from a passage-at-arms with the gipsies, and I should have to listen to that. I tried to outline the few leading points of the article, and as I drew the typewriter closer, the most appalling crash came from the door. I flew to it, believing it to be the vanguard of an air raid. Hughie had been forced as far as the landing, and to show his indignation had aimed a kick at my door in passing.

"Oh, I'm ever so sorry," said the panting Mrs.

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Huggins, "I don't know what has come over him; he's ever such a good boy ordinarily. It's just it being all strange, and him being a bit scared. You come on, or I'll smack your bottom. I will now."

"I hate 'em all," said the charitably-minded Hughie, and having slapped her restraining hand, took one look at me, and apparently satisfied with the fact that I look a good deal sweeter than I really am, accepted me on my face value and kicked my shins good and hard.

There is only one way to deal with young men of that age who kick grown-up people's shins in an unprovoked assault. Two can play at that game, and I can kick harder than he can.

"Oh, what a shame! The poor little chap," cried his mother. "Oh, you ought to be ashamed of yourself, hurting my little Hughie."

"She kicked me," screamed Hughie.

Above the row I made myself clear on one point. If we had to live in the same house on the same landing, Hughie and I would have to come to an understanding.

"Whenever you kick me, I shall kick you," I promised him, "and harder. So you'd better think twice before you begin it."

"I hate your ugly face," screamed Hughie.

I felt about him as he did about me. It wasn't that he was a sweet child badly brought up; he was a beastly child who deserved all that he got, and more. Why in the world could not my silly Aunt Mabel have left these people where they were?

I went into my room and locked the door, hoping for the best.

Aunt Mabel returned a good hour on. It was getting dark, or I do not think that she would have

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come home at all, but she had left her gas mask at home, and in it her torch, and she gets a bit scared of expeditions after dusk. In common with many spinsters of her years, she cherishes the queerest ideas about rape in ditches, and labours under the delusion that if she is out too late she runs the risk of a possible seduction.

She had apparently had the most appalling row at the encampment and they had beaten her at it. They had lied to her right and left. They had made uncomplimentary remarks about her appearance and her family. She had returned with their rudery ringing in her ears, and of course no purse, which they swore that they had never taken and she was a dirty liar to suggest it!

She now sent for the policeman.

Although I begged her to let it alone, nothing would induce her to do so. Somebody had been done. Very much done. Now she was attacking it as though it had been her personal loss, and she refused to drop it. I told her that the Huggins family had arrived and seemed ghastly, and she said that they were strangers in a lone land, and whilst waiting for the policeman, she marched after them to bid them welcome.

All this may be Christian, but it is galling to her relations. What that village must think of Aunt Mabel I dare not imagine. I know what I think of her.

I went down into the Johnstones' kitchen where they were sitting around the table at country tea. I said that I wanted to apologize for the Huggins's, but they really were awful, and I could not make out what we should do with them.

My-son-Alec seemed to think that if he could get Hughie alone, he could put the fear of God into him,

The Gipsies

but I don't think the fear of God is much use to a child who is a tell-tale, and has a possibly indignant mother to whom to carry the story.

My-son-Alec thought this could be managed, but I knew that Mr. and Mrs. Johnstone were worried about it all; they had never wanted the Huggins's in the first place, and foresaw complications.

We had a pleasant tea, save for the fact that the tea itself was so strong. I never have been the expert tea-bibber, preferring coffee, but when it comes to a really good cup of country tea, strong, and black, and stewed, I go squeamish about it. Not taking milk in, it does not help, but I learnt that habit out in Malta, where you can choose between goat's milk and possible typhoid, or condensed milk out of a tin, which is not very pleasant.

In England they will tell you that goat's milk does not smell, is luscious, and super-creamy. Ever since the war began, the B.B.C. has been setting out goatly propaganda on how to keep them, where to keep them, and how to get so many gallons per diem from the really intelligent, co-operative goat. I have only known the goat in Malta, which trails about the streets, up and down the steps, with dirty little bust-bodices, proffering milk at every door. The milk smells frightful; you can trace its whereabouts from an adjacent street. It is definitely dangerous for the Englishman to drink.

I believe now they are doing away with the goats in Malta, which is a pity, because, although smelly, they were very picturesque, and I cannot bear to think of the streets without their bleating herds, and the sound of their bells, and the boys calling "*Haleeb.*" Just as I cannot think of the island now without remembering the man who must have had some

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unfortunate accident in his youth, who trailed through the *Barracca* and the Hastings Gardens selling peanuts, and calling his wares in shrill girlish tones. These places change. Malta must be different to-day, with its tarmac roads, its bus services, and its United Dairies. If it has got that far.

I wonder.

Aunt Mabel found me in the Johnstones' kitchen, and thought it 'most extraordinary'; it would only give them ideas. She thought it so undignified when a lady forgot that she was a lady. I enquired if she meant me, which was a false move on my part, because she did mean me, and had to say so, seeing that she could not tell a lie!

There came more shrieks from upstairs, just as the policeman arrived. I don't think he had hurried himself.

"If it's them lights again," he said, "I don't mind telling you that it ain't no good. Mrs. Macpherson has done her best, and she is a very nice lady. I can't keep on bothering her all the time."

Aunt Mabel explained that it was not the lights, it was my purse which had been pilfered by the gipsies. I thought 'pilfered' was a good word, though hardly the right one perhaps. The policeman thought that hoping to get it back was rather a busted flush, seeing that the money had not been marked, and anyway they would have buried the purse itself, which was the only thing that I could possibly identify it by.

Aunt Mabel was all for digging up the whole encampment; for a couple of pounds it hardly seemed worth it. Then she suggested that perhaps I kept a note of the numbers, or marked the money; then I think she recognized that it was all very silly and knew

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that we should have to let the whole thing go, and got quiet and rather angry.

The policeman said that he would go down to the encampment and warn them that this had happened; there had been a complaint and he would have to go further if there were any more trouble. He might even persuade them to leave the village. Aunt Mabel agreed to this and felt that if they could be persuaded to go it would be worth while abiding by the loss. I knew they would sit tight whatever she or the policeman chose to say. The gipsies were on a clear wicket; we knew they had got the money, but could not prove it. Nothing would make them budge an inch, quite obviously.

In future I should never dare go for a walk past the encampment, because they might all set upon me—lurcher dogs, babies and the entire flock. I wished I had held my peace and had stuck to my original idea of not letting Aunt Mabel know a thing about it. It would have been far better.

One thing was certain.

I would never let her know anything in future.

XVIII

Hughie Huggins

IT was working-party day.

The evening paper article was finished and published, and now I was trying to map out a serial, if only the environments would allow me to do this.

"Never mind, there's a lot of copy at the working-party," said Aunt Mabel, "now you hurry up, else you'll be late."

I do wish people would let me do my own job.

There is no copy at the ordinary little working-party, as any author could have told her, but it was useless to argue, and off we went.

We had almost finished *Mein Kampf*, which I don't think much of, and there was a difference of opinion as to what book we should read next. It was put to the public vote. I made the suggestion that we should read something that wasn't about the war, because I do think it is such a pity to keep harping on it; something humorous would surely be a good idea, but apparently I had dropped a bad brick here, because nobody else thought so.

The Vicar's wife considered that we ought to read *Stalin's Life History*, Heaven knows what for! Aunt Mabel suggested that the life of one of the saints would be an example, or the *Imitation of Christ* should be very helpful.

I wanted them to read a novel.

"It is because you write them," said Mrs. Cobb, I thought unkindly.

Hughie Huggins

Mrs. Cobb was not a pleasant woman, and I realized that I should have my work cut out in getting her a suitable part for that entertainment. I know she thought that I had suggested reading a novel aloud because I felt that I might make money out of it, which was quite untrue.

Writers do not make the fortunes out of their novels which the average layman supposes. You get so much down, and after that you wait patiently for the royalties, and you may possibly wait a very long time.

Just as you don't get the innumerable free copies of your books which people think. I receive six copies and no more. I can tell you that it is a bit annoying when you have to go out and pay for your own book to give somebody who is pestering you for it. You are already sick to death of it, having slogged for hours on end at it, and grown to dislike it more and more with every paragraph. Then to have to pay for it to boot! What a catastrophe!

I thought that a novel was far more suitable to the village, and in the end the Vicar's wife was persuaded by me to put it to a show of hands. I knew that this would give her her Waterloo, as far as the *Life of Stalin* was concerned. It did too. Some of the people had never heard of him, and those who had, had not liked what they had heard. They just wanted a 'nice book,' and somebody even dared to voice the opinion that they didn't think *Mein Kampf* was a very nice book.

I was with them.

Having reached this stage of the proceedings, Aunt Mabel accused me of demoralizing the people and biassing them against Mrs. H., who cast a very horny eye upon me. Apparently she had heard of

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the jaunt on the boys' hand-cart, and she did not think that it was at all nice. I didn't either.

"That incident," said I, "is dead."

I had cramped my own style in the working-party by giving the opinion that a novel was the thing. Yet they had misguidedly asked for my opinion, and it was what I actually thought.

Walking home, my arm clasped firmly in the rather bony one of Aunt Mabel, so that we could both share the one torch so veiled in tissue paper as to dim the light and make it not worth the sharing, she told me that she thought it a great pity for me to start throwing my weight about at public functions.

"What weight?" I asked.

She said that she knew I thought it very clever to write books, yet it was something that everybody could do, if only they settled down to it, but most people couldn't afford to waste the time.

I became angry.

I said that innumerable people could undoubtedly write books, but the acid test came in the selling of them. She ignored that and started telling me a story.

The dear Vicar had written a most talented work, she told me, and he had sent it to a publisher called Gollancz. Had I heard of him? I said that I had. She told me that even if he were a friend of mine, all she could say was that he was a very rude man. He had not even troubled to write back to the dear Vicar, who had worked for months on this most exceptional book of his, but Mr. Gollancz had sent a small printed slip, and when pressed for an explanation, which of course the dear Vicar had every right to demand, and which he had insisted upon, Mr. Gollancz had said that the length was wrong (as

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though that mattered!), and that the subject was unsuitable, and altogether he had been most objectionable.

"And who is he, anyhow?" asked Aunt Mabel.

"Well, and what has the Vicar done with the book?" I asked, because surely the wrongness of 'Mr. Gollancz' solicited opinion now hung in that balance.

I saw that now she did not want to pursue the subject, and because of this, determined to go through with it to the bitter end. The dear Vicar had tried it on several other publishers, said she, but there was undoubtedly a ring. They were most unfair. The whole village had come to the conclusion that there was no chance for the outsider. She cast me a look, which, although I was in the dark, I knew quite well said things, and she commented in a strained voice that she did think it was a very extraordinary thing that I had ever managed to get inside that ring.

"Are you suggesting," I asked, "that I threw in a make-weight in the shape of certain amiabilities, in conjunction with the publication of my books?"

When I talk like that, Aunt Mabel never knows what I mean. She gave a lurch, and I, being nearer to the ditch than I had thought, floundered into it. The ditch in this particular place is the main drain. The district surveyor will not like my saying so, and will probably sue me for libel, but it still is the main drain. You have only to smell it to know whence its origin. And here was I, plunged in it, up to the knees. I had the satisfaction of taking Aunt Mabel in with me, and naturally that was the moment for the torch to start giving out.

"Why do you want to do it up in all that ridiculous paper?" I asked her.

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"It's the law," said she. She digs out these ideas from some unknown source, the parish magazine probably. "You have to have three thicknesses of tissue paper or the enemy can see it."

"Bosh," said I.

"Oh yes, you young people don't pay any attention to such things, but when you get to my age . . . etc." This story of 'when you are my age' is one which has menaced me all my life. When I was a child she brought it out; as a young girl I caught it and accepted it as a martyr. As a married woman I made rude comments, all to no purpose. This attitude of hers can't last, I assured myself, but by Jove, it *has* lasted! To-day I am a moderately successful writer, I have a son grown-up and married, but it does not seem to make the slightest difference, and I shall never talk Aunt Mabel down, nor catch her up in life.

It makes me sick.

Anyway, it did seem to be a bit idiotic to be squabbling together in a ditch, the whole scene being lit by a wonky torch fast threatening to die on us.

I helped her out 'as best I could, commenting that if this was likely to happen frequently I really must get some gum-boots, then we started for home again.

Country blackout is very black indeed.

Somebody had left the hand-cart just inside the back-yard and, because she was so wet—and after all Aunt Mabel is getting on in years—we tried to take the short-cut home, and banged ourselves badly on that. Aunt Mabel was hurt. I think she made the most of it, but she had had enough of the argument which had lurched us into the ditch and she blamed Colin Mac. and my-son-Alec for the incident with the hand-cart.

Hughie Huggins

She was probably quite right, but it did not help.

I have got to admit that in spite of my valiant efforts at the beginning of the war, I was taking the car out less and less these days. My first enthusiasm for it had paled, and I had had a very unpleasant interlude in the midst of the deserted Cotswolds which had made me feel unhappy about it. The fact that it was entirely my own fault had not made it any more comfortable.

I had come out of a bye-lane into the main road, halfway up a hill, sounding the horn too soon, so that the approaching car had not heard me, and I shot out straight under her bows. Nobody was hurt, but I nearly fainted with horror and found myself afterwards shirking any chance of driving.

It had put me off.

"A very good job, too," said Aunt Mabel unsympathetically; "it is not patriotic to run cars at all these days. Nobody ought to do it."

"If you don't do it soon, the thing will become a fetish and you'll never do it again," said Robbie, which was true.

But I did not drive the car, I went walks instead. There are plenty of little villages round about which I could visit, all settling down into the general decay of the late autumn. Fewer cars were on the roads, and it made the walks less interesting. I went quite a lot to a pig farm which interested me and I found in a bye-lane. It stood back in an orchard, and here the boars browsed. There was Willy who always went for your legs; there was George, and a snub-nosed pig painfully like an old friend of mine, who looked amiable enough but always roptled you up like an old potato.

I know we had great fun one day, because I met

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my-son-Alec up there, and the dear Vicar was going to the farm to try to get them interested in the scheme for the Polish refugees. My-son-Alec suggested that he should take the short-cut across the orchard, and Mr. H. did. I had my first real laugh for ages when I saw Willy peering round an apple tree, and then the charge.

We daren't stop to see the end of it, but Mr. H. wasn't killed, because I saw him on his bicycle later in the day, going round with blanc-manges for the sick.

Our own farm was a little difficult at times. I thought that the matrimonial obligations of the bull might have been more veiled, but everything went on quite publicly in our back-yard. Expressing my disgust to Aunt Mabel, she said that she had never noticed anything, with the air of a martyr who, having a pure mind herself, cannot imagine where in the world you pick up all your disgusting knowledge.

But she was having a time with Hughie and Mrs. Huggins, who had proved themselves to be thorns in everybody's flesh. The first thing that happened was the wholly unexpected discovery that Mrs. Huggins was *enceinte*. The district nurse found that out. Occasionally she came to take tea with Aunt Mabel, who went round the parish doing a house-to-house collection for her subscriptions and then wanted to have a nice talk about it.

It was on a Saturday, because Aunt Mabel and I had been up at the church doing the flowers there, until it was almost blackout time. I thought that it grew all most eerie, but Aunt Mabel said in an impressive voice that it was God's House, and therefore nothing and no one could harm us there. That was hardly what Sir Thomas à Becket had found, I informed her, which made her angry.

Hughie Huggins

However, as we came back through the churchyard, and the torch grew dim as her torches always seem to do, I thought she was in undue haste. I remarked on this, reminding her that it was God's acre, and nothing could harm us there. But she said that wasn't the same thing at all. She never had liked churchyards, and always hoped that she would never be buried in one. I suggested cremation, but she thought that was rather too hot, so we had a really pleasant little chat as we tottered home, arm-in-arm.

In the incipient blackout everybody walks arm-in-arm, because if you don't, you walk into the ditch.

The district nurse had already arrived. We knew this by the fact that her bicycle, of a very serviceable type, was propped against the yard wall, with an ominous-looking bag on the back of it. Inside, Nurse had taken off her cloak and was sitting over the fire, very starched apron and red-faced, with her frock turned back to warm her legs.

She had met Mrs. Huggins.

"You might have told me that there'd be a little job for me there," said Nurse, and you should have seen Aunt Mabel's face! She nearly collapsed.

Hughie Huggins had been a pest ever since he had arrived, and he had sent three of my best articles to perdition, because of the fury into which he had sent me. I simply cannot write when I am angry; I doubt if anybody can. I know that it is stupid to get angry with a little rat like Hughie Huggins, but what can you do when you are built that way?

Everybody had been so busy saying what they thought about Hughie, that attention had been concentrated on him, and nobody had noticed Mrs. Huggins. She was a weak, complaining little woman, frequently having 'bad turns,' and always threatening

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to smack Hughie's bottom for him but never doing it. I remembered that I had thought her rather puddingy when I first saw her.

"She came here under false pretences," said Aunt Mabel; "this must be enquired into. I will send for her."

I saw a scene coming and made the excuse that I must get back to my typewriter. But when I had installed myself beside the log fire in my bedroom, I could not work, because I kept wondering what was going on downstairs, where there seemed to be an amiable peace prevailing.

This peace was a spurious one, broken suddenly by the infant voice of Hughie on the stairs howling at the top of his voice:

"My Mam's going to have a baby, and I don't want the little devil!"

And Aunt Mabel saying "Shush" very loudly, and Mrs. Huggins making her invariable threat of smacking the rounder portion of Master Hughie's anatomy.

Hughie did not shush! He came charging on to the landing, and opening my door, put his head round it.

"My Mam's going to have a baby, and I don't want the little devil!" he screamed.

My fingers itched to do what his mother threatened but refrained from carrying out, but I believe nowadays there is some ghastly law which permits you to be pestered to any extent, but insists that the pesterer shall go unassaulted. It seems most unfair to me. I seized the nearest cushion that I could lay my hands to and flung it hard at Hughie Huggins. Usually I cannot throw; I am the veriest jest with a tennis ball; but fury had done something diabolical to my aim, and I caught Hughie fairly and squarely

Hughie Huggins

on the face and knocked him off his balance. He was so surprised that he collapsed and came a frightful cropper, his head colliding violently with the door-handle.

The dreadful part was that he did not scream.

He dropped like a stone and lay there; for one terrible moment, I thought that the beastly child was dead. I rushed to him, gathering him up in my arms, and flew downstairs into the sitting-room, to where the district nurse still sat, her skirts turned back over her knees and exposing well-scorched firm legs.

"Look at this!" I gasped.

They did things to Hughie Huggins, they splashed water over him in a most uncomfortable manner; had I not been so frightened I should have felt that it was a glorious opportunity to get our own back on him; they brought him round. His mother, who had been reduced to a fit of hysteria, informed us that it would be sure to bring on a miscarriage, and that would be all my fault too.

Aunt Mabel said nothing at all, but she looked at me with that piercing eye of hers, and I knew that she thought I was already almost a murderess. It was ghastly.

Eventually Hughie Huggins came round, cried lustily, and said that his head ached. I gave his mother five bob for his money-box, and he was just sufficiently recovered to cry, "Gimme, gimme that, and don't you take it from me, Mam, you old . . ." Something or other which she declared that he must have heard from the men on the farm.

Afterwards I thought I had better make myself scarce. There was no more writing for to-day.

It seemed a shame that Hughie Huggins should be

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allowed to molest me so unnecessarily. It was sheer bad luck when I had got one up on him to have flopped him out, and to have darned well had to pay for it by a contribution to his horrid little money-box.

I slipped across the road to the Macphersons, and begged them to ask me to supper, promising that I wouldn't eat much if only they would let me stay. In the course of conversation I explained what had happened and they were most sympathetic. The Macphersons were a very jolly family who had solved the blackout problem by starting gambling parties. They gambled on Ludo and Halma, which sound quite innocuous, but believe me they're not what they seem to be. Snakes and Ladders can be as thrilling as Roulette, when you have something on it. I had a Snakes and Ladders system, and I made nine and fourpence by it, which I thought was pretty good considering that I am such a fool at that sort of thing, and have to do all my betting with a pin, or Reeves Shaw.

Reeves Shaw is the editor of the *Strand* magazine, and a gift to a woman who does not know which end of a horse starts first. I never go off to the Derby without seeing him first, and since I made this part of my Epsom ritual I have never returned from the course down on the day.

I won four bob that particular evening at the Macs', and enjoyed myself so immensely that only towards eleven did it dawn upon me that time had flown and that there was the nasty possibility of somebody waiting up for me across the road, with a wrath rather like that of God.

Then Colin Mac. insisted on seeing me home, which I knew was a tragic mistake because somebody

Hughie Huggins

would be sure to hear him and make trouble about that.

Somebody did hear him.

It was that lynx, Aunt Mabel!

Mercifully the war and the blackout have defeated her usual methods of slamming up windows and putting her head out to investigate as to who it can be. But she has astonishingly good hearing. She knew who it was all right, could not get down in time to catch me 'at it,' as she explained, but caught me fair and square on the stairs.

"You've been with those awful people again?"

I said that I had.

"What on earth can you have been doing to come home so late?"

I explained that we had played Halma, Ludo and Snakes and Ladders, and instantly that bogey of suspicion leapt into her eyes. She knew that it was not true, or that it could not have been her preconceived idea of Halma, Ludo and Snakes and Ladders. She did not trust me an inch. I turned haughty and went up to bed.

"If you don't believe me," said I coldly, "then there is no need for further argument. It happens to be the truth."

And I passed her with a superb gesture (or so I thought), save that the ill-gotten gains in my bag chinked together, and ought to have given the show away. I knew that she had her suspicions of me.

Hughie Huggins was making the most of his accident, and for the time being it hindered Mrs. Johnstone making the most of Mrs. Huggins' complaint, known sympathetically as 'being in a certain condition.' It is a queer phrase, that, because mercifully it is not so certain for some. 'It wasn't in

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the long run for Mrs. Huggins, though we were not to know that then.

"It was your Aunt who wanted her to come here," said Mrs. Johnstone, who tried to get me over on to her side whenever we had a word together, "and I must say that I can put up with a lot of things in this house, but not a confinement. She will have to make other arrangements."

I agreed with her whole-heartedly. Aunt Mabel thought so too, but as the need was not imminent we could, she felt, go into it later. At the moment she seemed to be immersed in the working party, and in this beastly entertainment that she was getting up. After Christmas would be time enough to deal with the problem of Mrs. Huggins, she thought; at the present moment we ought to concentrate on the entertainment, seeing that the year had suddenly taken it into its head to gallop away from us, and time was running so short.

So we threw ourselves into the project heart and soul.

XIX

The Entertainment

WHEN Robbie came down the next night, Aunt Mabel tackled him, suggesting that it would be a charming gesture if he went along to Mr. Samuel French's to pick out a couple of sketches which would be suitable for village acting. It was quite simple, she said, something preferably for three persons, and in a rural setting. She was thinking of the shepherd's smock.

Robbie has never done this sort of thing. He went to sea in the mid-teens, and although I daresay he has an intimate acquaintance with ward-room shows, they are not quite the same thing. I tried to explain this to Aunt Mabel, because I did not see why my poor husband should have to suffer for what was, after all, my aunt!

The upshot was that the next afternoon I had to go up to London with Robbie, spend the night in the unfurnished flat, get the jitters for my pains, and trot along to Mr. Samuel French's the next day to see what I could get suitable for the entertainment.

Time being so short, it had to be brief, easy to learn, and with parts which included everybody who insisted on being in it, so that nobody could take offence at being left out of it. There must be a very small fee attached, because Aunt Mabel was most insistent that they did not want to put money for nothing into any silly playwright's pocket!

I knew that if I failed to land this fish satisfactorily I should jolly well have to write the sketch myself,

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and I was most anxious that Mr. French should play his part. I did my best, ably assisted by a very charming young man, but when I got back in the blackest blackout ever, Aunt Mabel said that of course they could not act the one that I had chosen; it had no uplift.

It sounded rather like a bust bodice gone wrong.

"But," said I, "what do you want uplift for?"

In our village at home we didn't worry about uplift, nor did our parishioners. I don't think there is any uplift in the *Three Old Maids of Lee*, and that horrible trio called *Ye Shepherds Tell Me*, in which the shepherds never tell.

I have the most painful memories of my father, in company with two village men, standing on a platform suitably draped with Union Jacks, and flags to which we had no right (there was a bit of a fuss about a White Ensign later when an uninvited Commander got in and started throwing his weight about). This trio stood there bawling out querulous demands to shepherds to tell them something about their Flora.

We had Kentucky minstrels too, and there assuredly was no uplift attached to them, because uplift was not our cup of tea. I had never thought that she could possibly want it.

I suggested that perhaps it would be a good idea if she went up to London herself, knowing quite well that she was scared stiff of air raids, and nothing would get her a yard on the road to London if she could help it. She got me a nasty one back for that. She said that she thought it a little strange having a writer in the family, who either would not write them anything, or couldn't.

I might have known from the beginning how this

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argument was going to end. All day I had been shirking the wretched sketch, because I could not see how I could possibly include the three items that Aunt Mabel wanted included in it. Now I knew that I had wasted my time at Samuel French's, when I could have had my hair waved properly, and a decent manicure for a change. I'd obviously got to write the darned sketch, and nobody would like it when it was done; that was a foregone conclusion.

Hughie Huggins put his head round the door.

He said, "Oh, hello," and then confidentially, "You don't know what I saw that there bull a-doing of this afternoon. It was ever so funny."

I suggested that he should tell Aunt Mabel all about the bull, whilst I went upstairs to deal with the knotty problem of this infernal sketch. It wasn't easy, but I managed fairly creditably, so I thought. Mrs. Cobb could be the damsel in it; there was a skit on the shepherd boy, and then I introduced the dressy son of the squire who could wear my great-grandfather's wedding waistcoat.

I thought the whole thing turned out rather well, which is the undaunted optimism of the author and usually spells disaster. I admit that I had cribbed the original idea from Mabel Constanduros, which was very wrong of me, but (a) I hoped that she would never find out, and (b) I didn't suppose she would mind too much, because village acting would distort it out of all recognition.

The Mabel Constanduros part was jolly good, but Aunt Mabel read it through and buttoned up her mouth in disapproval; she thought it was vulgar. It would be such a pity to have anything of a vulgar nature, wouldn't it?

She suffers from an inferiority complex which makes

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it impossible for her to read a manuscript without applying it to herself. Before she had gone very far I knew that she had run away with the idea that the whole thing was guying the village (and herself) and that put R.I.P. to it.

She started by saying that they couldn't have this, that, and the other!

For many years now I have been dealing with publishers whom, Heaven help me, I had dared to consider fussy. Never have I found any single one so exacting as my Aunt Mabel. The publisher is usually a very amiable man. He meets you when you sign your contract with him, and you sit in his office and say what a good show it all is (the contract, I mean, not the office); you discuss the future, and remark how valuable the partnership ought to be to both of you, and say goodbye. After that, you generally hear no more of him.

You deliver your book to the date prescribed (leastways some don't, but I always do); he accepts it in a silence which, although not damning, is hardly encouraging; he publishes it, advertises it for a couple of weeks, and then apparently forgets that either you or your book have ever been.

The manuscript that you once thought would set the Thames on fire ceases to interest anybody after the first couple of reviews, and fades adroitly out of the advertisements. Nobody notes its passing.

Aunt Mabel invariably sees the worst criticism to be got, detaches a phrase from its context with the dexterity of a James Agate, and holds it up to me to look at. She sends me these little slices of life, attached to her letter in a postscript (you will observe that the pith of a woman's letter lies in her postscript), and she comments:

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"I suppose you have seen this one?!!!!" with the exclamation marks intact.

I and my publishers get on pleasantly, seeing that we hardly ever meet, though I gather that Aunt Mabel thinks that I am most intimate with them, because whenever their name is mentioned she looks down her nose and assumes a Tell-it-not-in-Gath expression.

Aunt Mabel with her sketch for the December entertainment was horrifying. She was as bad as the worst editor.

Far be it from me to condemn editorial policy, for therein lies my bread and butter, or rather my jam. My publisher keeps me in bread and butter, the editor jams it for me! You of the lay mind little know what we writers suffer from the editor. He works in turn under a director who usually gives him socks. Being a salaried man, liable to notice to quit, he jolly well hangs on to his job tooth and nail, as long as ever he can. Who is to blame him for that, anyway?

He is naturally alarmed to go against the ordinary rut of buying, and although he is always asking for "something exactly like the last only quite different, please," because that is what he had been told to ask for, secretly he is not so anxious to be different. He wants it to be exactly like the last thing that his directors liked. That is as it should be.

But the difficulties of dealing with editors and remaining pleasant under the most turbulent circumstances are legion. There is the horror of seeing your best work cut to bits with a gay "Well, I know you won't mind, will you?" as though it could be a thing that you actually liked.

Since the war came along, I have realized with the best of them that you have got to put up with what

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you get, and say nothing. Conditions are bad. Papers are collapsing, and more will go for certain. It is not going to be an easy time for anybody, and the only thing that you can possibly do is to be as amiable as you can about it, and grin and bear, hoping that your amiability will at least earn you a good conduct mark for pleasantness in editorial minds.

"A pleasant face is better than a pretty one," as my misguided mother once told me. I wonder if she really believed that nonsense? She had a cupboard full of old tags which may have brought me up very well, but have since left me with my tongue in my cheek wondering how she dared do it.

Aunt Mabel took my sketch to Mr. H., and Mrs. H. thought that it was rather advanced for the village, whatever that might mean, and would I please do something simpler?

I had not meant to start the job all over again, but of course I had to, because I could not let them down. Aunt Mabel and Mrs. H. seemed to think that ideas for suitable sketches presented themselves *ad lib.* to a writer. They were in fact in their dozens in her brain, like clothes pegged out on a line. I had just to haul down the one which I considered most suitable and present it to them. I could not explain that things did not work this way, because neither of them would have believed me.

At last I got something they tolerated, and anyhow the work released me from the onerous duties of putting the "Indian Love Lyrics" into band parts for the trio, and accompanying their slitherings on the piano.

"After all," said I to Aunt Mabel when I brought my final attempt at the sketch downstairs for her to see, "I do think you might realize that usually I am paid

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for this kind of thing. I am not your guest. I am staying here on my own, and you do trespass on my time about the sketch. If this one doesn't suit I shall throw in my hand."

"I haven't anybody else to help me, dear," said she in a *piano* voice, which of course was unanswerable and made me feel an utter cad.

Hughie Huggins was there at the time.

He said, "The rabbits in the hutch at the back of the yard have got young 'uns. Mr. Johnstone says you have to keep two rabbits if you want young 'uns; yet you've only got one cat and that's got kittens."

"Yes dear, but we don't talk about these things," said Aunt Mabel, who was trying to do her best by Hughie Huggins, and make a gentleman of him. What a hope!

"Garn!" said Hughie, "I does. I want to know everythink. I'm a nosey parker, Mam says. You're an old maid, aren't you?"

"I am," said Aunt Mabel, I thought with commendable courage, but there was a hint of battle in her eye, because although men do, not appeal to her, nobody likes being called an old maid to her face.

"Which means that you haven't never . . ."

I left.

There are some things that one cannot bear, and having flopped Hughie Huggins out once, I dare not repeat the experiment because I had learnt my lesson.

Robbie came down for a long week-end; he had had the most frightful cold again, I don't think he had ever really shaken off that one he caught at Clare, and we spent the whole time sitting over the log fire:

It was not a happy week-end.

All the time it was raining with a cold-driving mist,

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and there were rumours of hostile aircraft over the Thames estuary, which frightened Aunt Mabel into fits. For a woman so certain of the heavenly blessing when she passes over, I must admit that she gets uncommonly nervous.

There were no air-raid warnings, but my-son-Alec got to hear of it, and he went out and 'saw to things,' whatever that may mean. There were places of refuge arranged in the village, because there were cellars and some of the more timorous had dug themselves trenches. It seemed rather foolish to me. But my-son-Alec had specially private information on the subject and he said that although the air raids might not be imminent at the moment, they certainly would come and then it would be a case of incendiary bombs and machine-gunning people as they came running out. It seemed a most pernicious thought, and he frightened me so much that I could not sleep that night, and thought the wind in the trees was distant Nazi planes.

Robbie got better by the Sunday afternoon, and when the rain cleared away we went out for a rather dim walk, but there was a horridly cold wind and we dared not venture far because blackout time was approaching. Also there was no incentive.

It is this lack of incentive in the country which is so damning. Literally there is nothing to stimulate you. To go by bus to Ashford was the wildest dissipation that I could hope for, and frankly I did not enjoy it very much. To walk round the village, or another village exactly like it, was not invigorating. The piggery, the farm where they were expecting Christmas lambs, the pond with the ganders on it, Willy and George the boars, were all the joys that the village could afford.

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And of course the two days a week when the bank opened for its scheduled hours, and a pimple-faced young man doled out money in exchange for my cheques which always made him suspicious of my good faith.

My literary cheques have the names of the contributions they cover written on the back of them. Some of the titles worry my bankers enormously. I was doing some confessional work at that time; I saw him definitely harassed by, "My baby was born in gaol," "I know that I murdered my mother," "I married a burglar." This was the kind of title that he just couldn't understand, but as I looked very solemn and entirely innocent, he did not like to ask questions about them.

"You cannot possibly exist through an entire war here," said Robbie that Sunday night; "it may be three years, and that would be awful."

"But at the moment it does not seem to be happening at all."

"Which may prolong it. It must work up to something one of these days, and the difficulty is that if I get you back to London, it is sure to be the very week that Hitler decides to come over and bomb us."

"If he ever does."

Probably the state of tension had been the most difficult thing that we had had to cope with all along. The question is, what is the answer to it? I felt quite sure that if I did go back to the flat, the air raids would promptly begin; just as I was equally convinced that if I stayed away they wouldn't come at all, to be aggravating. Ahead loomed the time, I knew, when Robbie would perhaps be taken away to rejoin the Navy, and somehow I did not see myself

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living on alone in a ground-floor flat with nobody else sleeping in the place.

What next?

We tried to arrive at some sensible decision that evening, sitting over the log fire, whilst Aunt Mabel was at church, and Hughie Huggins was roaring himself hoarse, having been sent to bed.

"If I could get back to London for Christmas," I said to Robbie, with longing, "do you think that might be possible?"

Many of my friends had been creeping back. Just at first we all seemed to have been scattered to the four winds of Heaven, and I realized that London might have been as lonely as the country last September. It was changing now. The truth of the matter was that the townsfolk simply could not stick it, and one by one they were sneaking homewards.

The next evening I went into Ashford to the cinema with Colin Mac., who had found a gallon of petrol by nefarious means and wanted to celebrate. They were very old pictures, threaded through with smudges and smears, but I thanked God for them. Aunt Mabel was very angry when I got back, because the Vicar had been in about rehearsals of my sketch, and of course I wasn't there, which, said she, was a fine thing to have happen.

They had now woken up to the fact that time was pressing, and if they were to get the entertainment ready for the date they had arranged, they would have to start intensive rehearsing right away.

"You really can't keep on going off with that horrid young man!" said Aunt Mabel righteously. "It is most disgusting."

That is a nice thing when you go to the cinema for

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only the second time since the war began, to see a Tommy-rotten Shirley Temple picture. I said so forcibly, because I was so sick of being preached at. Hughie heard this; he was one of those lurking children, for ever listening behind doors, and he came swaggering in, his little pig eyes dancing.

• "Shirley Temple's my sweetheart!" said he, with a wink. "My mam says I know what's good. I do."

I pushed him out of the room again.

Why should we have to put up with Hughie Huggins trespassing on every family jar? He said that I had pinched him (he was probably quite correct) and went off in a hurry to tell his mother, who gave me beans on the stairs, with the result that the atmosphere suffered from strain.

Next day I attended rehearsal. It was awful.

We sat on forms at the back of the over-heated village hall, and people kept talking a lot on the platform but doing nothing, and this looked likely to continue for a long time. Two little girls were to open the show with a patriotic medley duet, which started with the "Siegfried Line" and ended with "Rule Britannia." Then Mr. H. was to sing, what he called 'breaking the ice.' I put my money on his choice resting with "The Trumpeter," but it was "Friend o' Mine." He explained that he particularly wanted to keep off anything warlike, because he was pacifist, and he thought that anything martial was not in keeping with the cloth.

After that there was to be my sketch, and the trio to follow it, and then the funny man. The funny man was very popular and was the blacksmith's assistant, young, virile and brawny, with a knowing twinkle in his eye. I saw that Aunt Mabel had suspicions of him, and so had I. I thought that they

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would naturally have the good sense to read the verses through of the songs that he proposed to sing. (This was a precaution that we always took at home, having once bought it rather badly, when the squire's lady had flounced out in a pet!). But these trusting folk did nothing of the sort.

This'll mean trouble, I told myself, and I had another look at the blacksmith's assistant, and remarked that he seemed to be a pretty broad young man in all meanings of the word.

There was a song to be sung by a little girl in Japanese outfit in the second half, and the Japanese outfit gave the Vicar the idea of doing a grand finale of the children of all nations in groups, with peace descending amongst them, carrying a white star, which would be an original and tasteful closing number.

"Won't the dresses cost a lot?" I suggested, knowing that even hiring these things they work out at much more than the average village wants to pay.

He said that you could do a lot with crêpe paper, if only ladies would volunteer, and looked at me in a most marked manner, which I found very awkward.

The first reading of the sketch was a formidable fiasco. I had guessed from the beginning that Mrs. Cobb would not like her part, and she didn't. Not young enough, nor *ingénue* enough, as I had foreseen. But, then, Mrs. Cobb was not very young, although she liked to think she was. She had a daughter of ten who played scales assiduously every morning at eight. I could hear her because my bedroom window looked across the farmyard and into the Cobbs' garden.

Mrs. Cobb wanted to be the simple village maiden, and she wasn't simple, and she wasn't—well, she had a

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daughter! Mrs. Cobb said some very bitter things about my sketch, and it transpired that the whole room wanted to have a finger in the pie, and to alter it. In the end I became rude.

"Why not write it yourselves?" I asked.

I threw a fit of temperament, it was the only thing. I did it well. I had to be escorted to the corner (ill-advisedly beside the boiler) and have my hands patted by Aunt Mabel, and people swarming round, saying, "There, there," as they do to Hughie when he is at his worst. All the same they respected me for it. And my sketch stood.

When Aunt Mabel and I went back to lunch she seemed to think that it would be a very good idea if Hughie Huggins were to take the part of the little Indian boy in the finale. It would be a treat for the little man. The moment that we got into the house, she told him of it, but it seemed that Hughie did not want to be the little Indian boy; he wanted to be Hitler. If he couldn't be Hitler, he wouldn't be anybody, he said, and when it was explained that was quite all right, because he needn't be anybody, he gave tongue.

I could see that this unfortunate entertainment was going to be the last word in horrors.

XX

Time Goes On

THERE had been a telephone message for me, from my agent in London. This book was wanted in much more of a hurry than I had thought, and I got through to him immediately. It was obvious that my time was going to be very fully booked up for some time, and when I had finished talking to him, I came back and told Aunt Mabel that I should have to give up the working party and doing the church flowers, but I would stick to their rotten entertainment, because if I let that go it would be such a complete let-down for everybody concerned.

She was most surprised and offended, which was a bomb on me, because I had thought that I was doing the decent thing in sticking to the sketch. She could not see how anybody wanted to buy my books in the first place, and secondly she thought it all wrong to give up God's work for Mammon.

"Why Mammon?" I asked, "surely that is rather a rude way of alluding to my publisher?"

She argued that it was most certainly Mammon. I made money out of the books, and money was Mammon. I'd be far happier if I did the church flowers and gave up my life to the service of others, because that was the only true way in which a person could find peace.

I pointed out that in dealing with the letter-bags on papers, a writer does give a good bit of her life to the service of others, but Aunt Mabel did not choose to see that. She thought that the people who

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wrote to me were wicked girls who were going to have babies, having got themselves into trouble. That was the way that she put it. I became argumentative, always a mistake, but you have got to do something when you are marooned in the country, and are being attacked by a violent aunt. I said that, knowing a little of the sexual details of life, I personally believed it to be a physical impossibility for any young woman to get herself into trouble!

That put the fat in the fire all right, as I might have known it would. Aunt Mabel was profoundly shocked.

In the midst of all this Hughie Huggins marched into the room as though it were his own. He had decided that he wouldn't be Hitler after all; he would be Stalin, because he had seen a picture of Stalin and he had got a bigger moustache.

"Run away," said I.

His retaliation was to kick my shins harder than was pleasant, whereupon I kicked back. I made this rule in the beginning and I intended to abide by it. I didn't see why I shouldn't. One is permitted to brain a burglar in self-defence, why not kick Hughie Huggins from exactly the same motive?

"That child would behave a good deal better if you would let the poor little fellow alone," said Aunt Mabel severely.

She went over to Hughie and very kindly picked him up, whereupon he retaliated by calling her the exact opposite of the farm dog, one, Peter! I left them to it.

I felt that it was impossible to write a reasonable book in this prevailing atmosphere. People talk of the country being peaceful, but look at it! I felt the urgent need for air, blackout or no blackout, and put

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on one of those big hooded coats which came in with the war, and are such a joy to wear. Outside the very gate, I stumbled over my-son-Alec and Colin Mac. going to the "Jolly Waggoner" for a game of darts.

"Come too?" they suggested.

In despair I went.

I do not drink. This is no personal merit of mine, and it is not sanctimonious. I have no objection to other people getting as boozy as they like, that is their funeral and their own fat heads the next day; but if I take any drink whatsoever, I merely go sick and giddy. I feel awful, get no kick out of it, and, what is even worse, just loathe the taste of it. Honest water is my drink; vulgar, I admit, and it always makes waiters look down their noses at me, as though I were some extraordinary kind of fish and not a woman at all.

There is a major disadvantage in not drinking; it makes me feel an utter fool when I am propping up a bar, where common decency prevents me from asking for the drink that I prefer. I act as a depressant upon others. Barmaids think that I am being smug. It is not at all a pleasant feeling.

"If I come with you, won't I be a nuisance?" I enquired.

They assured me that I should be nothing of the sort, I thought with unusual optimism, and I had to admit that this did seem rather an outrageous method of retaliating on Aunt Mabel for all the rude things that she had said about me. She believes that any woman who crosses the threshold of a pub. is scarlet, and that all men are verging on D.T.'s.

Off we went, arms linked, which is the way the whole village keeps in formation in the blackout.

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The pub. was full, and very smoky. It was absolutely blue and had the most frightful fug prevailing. It was a low room, and three obviously habitual customers were set on a settle in the corner saying absolutely nothing, but blinking hard at everything that went on, and everybody who came in, and with three full pint pots set before them.

The barmaid was fat and blowzy, pulling away at a beer-engine and free with her back-chat. She was too plump, too pink, too gold, but a matey individual, and the whole of the village clustered round her and the potman who was alluded to pleasantly as 'Toby.'

I must say that there is a lot to be said for the congenial atmosphere of the village pub. It is so much more pleasant than the homes where these men live, most of them over-furnished and untidy, and perhaps run by a carping wife. We made for the dart board when it was free, the other two with tankards, myself a dead loss to the house because I had nothing.

I had never played darts because I am particularly bad at games. I hurt a foot when I was fourteen and it laid me by for a long period of my life, when I should have been floundering through my rabbit days at tennis, and early efforts in golf and such like. Not that I should have had the chance of any golf in the heart of the country. I know my father tried to reassure us that our home was situated in exquisite *natural* links, but exquisite natural links be blown for a tale! Anyway, I was pipped on the post for games.

When most competitors of my own age had got through the preliminaries at sport, I had not even begun, and as I am reluctant to make a complete fool of myself in public, I lost heart. I always

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preferred my writing or my sewing ("So lovely to see a womanly woman," said my mamma fondly), and I have never cherished any of these fetishes about exercise.

"Exercise is tiring. How people can enjoy it I never can see. It is not at all my idea of enjoying myself, but, then, I have a very childish mind on amusements.

I have not got a straight eye, with the result that I never hit anything at which I aim, and I am not so advanced that I can solve the intricacies of hitting accurately the thing that I am not aiming at.

Darts seemed to be different.

I found that I had technique, or beginner's luck—naturally I prefer to think of it as being technique—and I made quite a success of it. The thing to do, I decided, was to throw quickly; just shut my eyes, put up a prayer and chuck. The dart was bound to get somewhere.

On this principle I most unfortunately stuck my-son-Alec in the shoulder, because I did not see that he was going up to the board to get his played darts back. Mercifully he had his shoulders well padded, though he denied this, and insisted that I had 'hurt him like Hell.'

To my intense surprise I won the first game; they seemed to be a bit surprised too, and I saw them exchanging looks, and wondered if it would be a good idea to retire on my laurels, or to go on. I went on, which was my complete undoing, because the chucking did not come off, and I very seldom hit the board at all, whilst they grew calmer and calmer, and scored magnificently.

The conversation in the "Jolly Waggoner" was amusing, all to do with the fat stock for Christmas, and

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th'auld pig, who, I gathered, was likely to do great things if given half a chance when the sale came off.

I did not realize that time was going on so fast, because it was pleasant and warm, and eventually to my horror the blowzy barmaid gathered up the glasses with Toby's help, and said, "Time, gentlemen," and the three habitués who had sat there with the three pints and never a word, got up and shambled off. The pleasantry died down. We were out in the street once more, and it seemed to 'strike very chill indeed after the fug of the "Jolly Waggoner."

My-son-Alec took me home and we thought it diplomatic to sneak in by the back way. Mr. and Mrs. Johnstone were sitting in the kitchen, with those innumerable cups of tea from which they never seemed to be really separated. Mrs. Huggins was looking languid in the wicker chair in the corner; she was one of those women who take their pregnancy hard, and want to attract sympathy.

Mrs. Johnstone said to me, "Your aunt's been looking for you."

I felt very brave. I have been grown-up for more years than I care to remember. I have a son who is also grown-up, and I should never think of talking to him as Aunt Mabel talks to me. It is a pretty pass if you arrive at my age and have people casting dark looks at you when you arrive home a little late. I went into Aunt Mabel's room, where she was sitting playing Demon Patience. Patience is always a sign that she has got a bit rattled. I remembered that from my extreme youth.

"Where have you been?" she asked.

I told her truthfully. I had been to the pub. I had been engaged in throwing a pretty dart with my-son-Alec and Colin Mac. She stared at me

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aghast. For a moment there was silence, then in a trembly voice she told me how it would reflect on her. Surely I must realize that it would be dreadful for her to have a relation who went into a common public-house, where everybody knew no nice woman ever went? I assured her that I knew several very nice women who went into public-houses, but I feel sure that she is convinced I know no nice women.

My temper died on me.

You cannot hurt old people in that way, even if their narrow-mindedness is absurd, and even if they don't care how much they hurt you. In the end I had no triumph; I had no grand moment. I slunk up to bed with my tail between my legs, realizing that I had only succeeded in making the poor old girl miserable and that I ought to be ashamed of myself.

Incidentally I was ashamed of myself.

I woke much later, to find that Hughie Huggins was screeching in a nightmare!

XXI

Oh, not a Nativity Play?

IT was on one of those awful constitutionals. The country had now sunk into its long sleeping for the winter. Everywhere looked just like everywhere else. 'The leaves had gone, the branches were stark. Frost came every night, and the mist, and always that beastly blackout descending on us in middle afternoon, entailing fearful fiddling with curtains, though, thank God, we had done with stone mullioned windows.

After that, the dark!

The evenings were too long; the days were too long. I read everything that I could, but you cannot do that all day long; nor can you keep on writing. You have to get out and about sometimes.

I walked along hard high roads. I trudged down slushy lanes, and took inadvisable short cuts which led me all over the place. There was the one which brought me out alongside the gipsies, and since our little contretemps they had stopped saying that I had a lucky face. They were the ones with the lucky faces, because they had got my purse.

I walked to the next village in three directions, but there was nothing stimulating anywhere; just a few oasts clustering together, a few farms, a few cottages, and a few swear words from me.

I found a derelict hen-pen midway between the villages, which attracted my ingenuity, and I fell back on a delightful little game which I patented in my youth. All that is required is a ball of string and

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some tit-bit likely to captivate the henly fancy.* Worms are the best things, but I always feel that worms are rather cruel, and very dirty. Succulent pieces of cabbage do equally as well, and are much easier to handle. You attach these to the length of strong string, and dangle it over the wire-netting; the higher the netting the greater the fun.

Hens are the most idiotic creatures, and when food comes along they take everything at a gulp; with a succulent morsel of cabbage on the end of a piece of string they have to go on gulping because to their amazement they just can't finish getting the thing down! When they have swallowed about six or seven inches, you proceed to heave. The hen rises from the ground in a flap, and for a few tantalizing seconds dangles in mid-air, feathers flying, unable even to squawk, and looking most surprised. Then she drops with a bounce.

It is a most entertaining game. The great joy being that the fools never see that you are having a little jest with them, but fall for the next tit-bit which you sling over the top, and then you start going through the whole process again.

The Vicar found me standing there, apparently admiring the gaunt hen-pen. He came pedalling along on his bicycle, sitting very erect, wearing parochial dress and white woollen gloves, whilst he carried an absurd little basket, in which, I dared bet, a blancmange nestled. We used to have to cart those beastly blancmanges round the country when I lived for my sins in the Rectory. I often wonder if the poor really appreciated them; personally I should have flung them back, because if there is one thing that I cannot stand it is the blancmange. Of all the overrated puddings! But there is a

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rectorial law that the blancmange is the right thing to trot around if you wear a dog collar. As you leave the house of the sick person you have visited, you say with a beneficent smile:

"I will bring you a blancmange to-morrow."

Whether it is a threat or a promise, I have never discovered, but you will observe that I know the routine.

The Vicar apparently suspected me of loitering with nefarious intentions, which was of course quite correct. I was a little anxious, and doing my best to conceal the ball of string and the succulent pieces of cabbage, and wishing that I had not started playing childish games. This sort of pleasantry is hardly dignified for a reputable authoress. But I was so dull and I just didn't know what to do with myself.

Mr. H. stood there discussing the fine weather, the crops, Christmas and the chickens, and I listened to him uncomfortably. Finally he said that he hoped the entertainment would be a success, and if it were, he had thought of doing a Nativity play for Christmas Eve.

The difficulty was to get somebody to play the part of the Virgin Mary. Everybody in the village always wanted to do it, and couldn't; also he felt that such a part should be played by an outsider. For instance, you could not have somebody's skivvy play the part one night and be scrubbing the doorstep the next. Why not? asked I. It always seems to be so queer that people never realize how simple were the saints, and what humble means of living they pursued.

He eyed me hopefully, and it was then that I realized that I might be elected to fill the rôle, and I couldn't do it. I am the world's rottenest actress; I am self-conscious, I laugh or I stand staring like a

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stuck pig. Also I would have to wear a halo, which is never becoming, and it seems to me rather *infra dig.* if you have to put on your halo with an elastic.

• “You certainly have the right type of face,” said the Vicar very earnestly indeed. I don’t think that he was really trying to get off with me.

I had one of my bright ideas. I explained that the Virgin Mary was a Jewess, obviously a dark woman, and I am blonde, or blondish. My hair, if my hairdresser lets it alone, would be the good old Saxon mud colour. It is truly British hair, so British that it tones with anything, but mercifully my hairdresser refrains from letting it alone, and she puts lights into it. Lights that Nature never really intended. In the uneven struggle with Nature my hairdresser wins. It helps a lot.

Thank goodness that nowadays a woman may confess to tinting her hair without everybody leaping upon her and thinking that she is a Jezebel, except of course Aunt Mabel.

The Vicar said that when it came to biblical characters one was allowed some licence, and again he looked, I thought, with over-interest at my face. I began to suspect him of not being altogether the credit to the cloth that Aunt Mabel still thinks. I have the type of face that is just silly. I look like a doll. I was born an angel child with a Satanic mind. Looking at me you would never suppose that I could dangle strings for unsuspecting hens, or sit on a hand-cart and waggle a bicycle lamp over the back. I was a little girl who looked as though she had • but beautiful thoughts; large wistful grey eyes, pink and white complexion, golden hair and an amiable mouth; but then all my family have that type of

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face, and Nature forgot to fit them out with the sort of minds that ought to go with them.

People who do not know me hesitate to say "Damn" before me. I look too good for Damn. I knew that Mr. H. was labouring under a delusion about me, and I knew also that nothing in this world would induce me to come out in a halo in his Nativity play.

"Besides," said I, thinking hard for another bright excuse, "the Virgin should be played by a very young girl, not by an old woman like myself."

Instantly he became facetious; I was a fool not to have known that he would adopt that angle. I admit that I look younger than my years, but not that much younger." Besides, said he, there is grease-paint. Much could be done, and the footlights would not be very strong. Apparently, he explained, they thought of rigging up something with acetylene bicycle lamps to give the effect of moonlight. I knew what they meant.

Anyway, I argued, if they were only using my face because the footlights were not very strong, I should take offence and would not act at all. I was huffed. First of all, with the contradictory mood of all women, I had argued that I was too old, and now, when Mr. H. suggested that the footlights were not strong, I believed that I had been insulted. True woman!

That was when the ball of string rolled out of my hand and into the mud at my feet with a splash. He stared at it. It must have seemed an odd accoutrement to be carting round the country, I admit. I tried to explain, but I saw that now I was losing caste noticeably. He did not like my explanations any more than I did, and I think that he surmised that I was telling the tale to cover other, and much more iniquitous, sins. Frankly he did not believe

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that I had played this game with the chickens. He thought that I was telling him about it to put him off the scent.

Finally he pedalled off in high dudgeon, and I had an idea that he thought public opinion must be right, and I was really a peculiar woman with a kink.

I had lost heart in my game with the hens; it was not the same success that it had been earlier in the morning, so I went into the next village and bought myself a bar of chocolate, which seemed the only thing possible, and munched it as I marched home.

But I made up my mind very firmly that whoever else wanted to go into it, I should *not* figure in Mr. H.'s Nativity play.

I was now torn between the book, which went wrong on me, and the rehearsals for Aunt Mabel's wretched entertainment in aid of the Red Cross. The book went gallantly for the first hundred pages, which is the way of all books, then either my interest began to flag, or my material petered out, or something went altogether wrong, but it certainly hung fire.

A writer is aware that she has got to write a certain number of words, because the writing of books is far more mathematical than most people suppose. A publisher does not just buy a book, as the average person seems to imagine; he stipulates for it to consist of so many thousand words, and although your first twenty thousand may go with a bang, the next twenty often hang back, and it is when you are dashing along on the last twenty-five thousand that you meet your Waterloo.

The publisher maintains that your book must be delivered per contract on the right day, or somewhere

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within a given limit, because he cannot have books arriving just when a temperamental authoress thinks she will or won't deliver the goods. That would upset his list beyond bearing. Obviously he has got to have the whole thing cut and dried.

There are two distinct lives for an author: there is the life of phantasy when his imagination runs riot and he can write what he will, and more or less as he will; and the material contract side, which knows that the goods must be delivered to the proper time, also that they must be up to length and standard.

The material side trespasses on the phantasy side; beautiful ideas have to have their wings clipped so that they may be kept within the narrow confines of fiction, which is always narrower than fact. Half the copy presented gratuitously to me by well-wishers, is not copy at all, because it is too strange. Fact gives you a series of details, whereas fiction gives but one detail, otherwise it would be too much of a good thing and read too fantastically.

Therefore the ideas proffered with the best intentions in the world by Aunt Mabel, and Mrs. Johnstone, and once by Mrs. Huggins, who, suffering acutely from morning sickness, suggested that I should put a miscarriage into my book, were entirely useless.

My husband is my most useful ally, because he has had a long training with this kind of work, can recognize a situation, and knows when he has turned the handle on a useful door for the admittance of a further flow of ideas.

But at this particular juncture Robbie was working so hard at the Foreign Office that it wasn't fair to tackle him on what was undoubtedly my own task.

Hughie Huggins was the supreme pest.

I have never heard a child scream as he could, or

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one who dropped worse remarks. His mother had no control over him whatsoever, and just let him carry on, merely keeping up her running commentary of what she would do to him this very minute if he didn't give over. Hughie knowing how safe he was never gave over.

The entertainment was going badly. It was futile, conducting these rehearsals, because everybody thought that they did their part beautifully, resented comment which could be construed as otherwise than favourable, and then got annoyed. We had harassing afternoons in the village hall, and Aunt Mabel, who is never a tactful woman, got the chance to prove that up to the hilt, which she did most ably.

I had put my foot down and said that I could only attend to the sketch, out of which all the best bits had been cut, and I found myself entirely at the mercy of the actors and the one actress, who seemed determined to do what they wanted with it. Mr. H was doing the producing, and I sat mutely beside him watching it all go wrong. I was getting wilder and wilder, and yet could do nothing to help myself.

Robbie came down and saw one rehearsal, but he had to sit on a very hard seat, and Nature has not equipped him adequately for hard seats. He kept grumbling.

"It won't do you any good wasting your time over these awful rehearsals," said he. "I believe that we ought to risk your coming back to town before Christmas."

I could not believe my ears.

"You can't mean it?"

"Hitler certainly won't do anything before Christmas, and he'll lie down till the spring. I'm a bit sick of paying double rent all the time."

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So was I.

It is hard to have a flat with a rental of over five pounds a week doing nothing in Chelsea, whilst you mould in the country at a further expenditure, hating yourself very much all the time. At the same moment I had no wish to find myself on the target at which a hundred German bombers were aiming, but there is something about the peace of the country which is very undermining.

Hughie Huggins was one of the somethings.

Wherever you went that beastly child seemed to be. I like children, there was a time in my life when I adored them, but as I grow older and meet the ultra-modern child, I have to admit that the maternal affections of my earlier life have faded more than a little.

People have said that it was a pity I did not have a child of my own by my second marriage. There are two ways of looking at that! Every night that Robbie and I lie down, we thank the powers-that-be that there are no bottles to be got, no attentions to youthful incontinence required, and no chance of orchestral accompaniments throughout the night. And every time we looked at Hughie Huggins, we said thank God that we have no children of our own.

The following day being Sunday, he literally drove us forth into the lanes.

We had meant to sit over the fire downstairs. Aunt Mabel would be at her devotions, which meant that he had the run of the room, and could gloat over the Sunday papers, to which she objects. She says that they are wicked. They make people work on a Sunday. It is useless to explain to her that it is the Monday papers that do that; she won't have it. She smiles blandly, and says that I know nothing

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about it. Sunday papers are the products of Beelzebub, which is a new name for Rothermere & Co.

I have no such scruples.

I like my Sunday papers, so does Robbie, though he always grumbles that there is no *Times* crossword, and won't be put off with the *Sunday Times* one. He waxes very peevish about that.

We sat over the fire, and just as we had got ourselves nicely settled, the door opened and in came Hughie Huggins. Apparently from the flow of conversation, it was one of those days when the *amours* of the bull would not wait. Love laughs at Sundays apparently, and there had been some cowlly promiscuousness in the backyard, which Hughie had overseen. He asked embarrassing questions, and at last, thinking that I would get rid of him, I told him to go and see my-son-Alec about it.

It was my-son-Alec's bull anyway.

Off he went, but he came back. My-son-Alec had apparently decided that was a game two could play at. Hughie had invented an abominable game of grating the chair legs on the linoleum. He said that it made "ever such a grand noise," like a pig when they killed it. Then he paused to enquire if we knew how they killed pigs.

Robbie was terse with him, but Hughie only said that he thought Robbie was a something—which he had obviously picked up from one of the farm-hands. It was not a pleasant name at all, though it tripped off Hughie Huggins' lips with surprising adroitness.

Robbie said that he wasn't going to stand that from a kid of Hughie's age, and if Hughie stayed, he would give him something to think about. Backing, Hughie got to the door, then said the word again in a

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much louder voice and went out into the hall, where he proceeded to scream it all down the passage as shrilly as he could.

Mrs. Johnstone came out of the kitchen making curious clicking noises with her false teeth, as she always does when she is flustered.

Robbie said, "I shall apply to the authorities about that blasted child. He isn't decent."

I explained that I thought possibly the authorities were dealing with hundreds of other blasted children, and other equally demented people were trying to deal with their indecencies. Robbie thought that Hughie's mother ought to do something about it. I explained tiredly that she was afflicted with morning sickness, which incapacitated her from doing anything; it was all very painful.

Anyhow, it seemed that we had got rid of Hughie for the moment, and I settled myself down to Madame Tabouis. I always read Madame Tabouis, though I admit that I find her unreliable, but all the same I stick to her. She propped me up through the Munich crisis, and I fought for a place at the Foyle luncheon to hear her speak only last summer.

She was a round-faced, pleasant little person, but she spoke for a very long time in a difficult accent. She had arrived at the conclusion that there were two ways out of the dilemma. Either there would be a war (the optimistic little soul actually said "a short war"), or there wouldn't.

That left me very cold.

I knew that much myself in spite of having no inside knowledge. For a time I gave up reading her, but the moment Europe got into more advanced difficulties again, there was I every Sunday, clinging on to Madame Tabouis with both hands. It is

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queer how one can find moral support from such a quarter.

I was getting along with Madame Tabouis, who was suggesting unexpected *dénouements* with Finland and Russia, which I took quite erroneously to mean that the whole thing would peter out, when Hughie Huggins put his head round the door and said the word again.

He must have taken off his shoes to sneak up to do it. That ended it. Robbie got up, and said that he would do fearful things to Hughie Huggins, if only he could lay his hands on him. And I was scared stiff that he *would* be able to lay his hands on him. I know what villages are. Nobody would take our side, and Robbie would probably do the child serious damage.

I said hadn't we better go out for a walk, but Robbie did not want to go out for a walk; he wanted to knock hell out of Hughie Huggins, and really I don't blame him.

I said that I wanted air, gave up Madame Tabouis—she had let me down before, so why worry about the woman?—and went upstairs for my hat.

Whilst I was putting it on, I heard the raucous retching of Mrs. Huggins next door, and suddenly the most frenzied shrieks from Hughie below. I thought "Robbie has caught him now and there will be a court case about this," and I rushed downstairs.

It was fate that had caught Hughie Huggins, thank God!

He had put on his boots again, and whilst half lacing them up, had apparently decided that he would have another go at us. Coming sneaking down the passage he had not seen the little step that splits it in half. Missing this, he got himself wound

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up in his own bootlaces, clutched at the hat-stand, and brought it down, himself with it, in one fearful purler.

"This place is Bedlam!" said Robbie, and out we went.

It was a glorious morning, but the weather had turned considerably colder. The 'godly were in church; the ungodly were lurking round the "Jolly Waggoner," slapping their hands together and assuming patient looks, knowing that it was a long time yet to opening time.

We walked across the fields to the next village with the frost lying under the lean hedges, and we got there just as the church clock struck twelve, and were able to go into the pub, for Robbie to have a pint.

This would be sure to be tattled back to Aunt Mabel by some thoughtful soul, and I knew without a doubt that it would react on my unfortunate head, but thought I had better say nothing. She would be most indignant to think that, whilst she was sitting in the church wondering how much the other churchgoers had paid for their hats, we had walked across the fields and I had watched Robbie absorb a pint in what I am sure she would call promiscuous company.

It was here that we came to a definite decision, sitting in this country pub., with the stuffed fox, and the boxing souvenirs won by mine host, and the smell of hot roast beef and Yorkshire coming through the open kitchen door. Robbie said that he thought I might get back to London before Christmas. I think in his heart he was lonely, and I am sure that he knew life was no good to me like this. I was wretched.

The war seemed to have settled down into a *pro tem* stalemate, and the chances of that being changed

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before the spring were remote. Conditions in the weather line always meant that war went phut for the winter. We had had some of that in Flanders before now.

•Going up for an odd night to London, to get one's perm. titivated, to see one's publishers about a book, or to try to see a few people, does not mean the same stimulation as living there. I was aching to get back. But I was scared of the blackout; it was the darkest thing that I had ever seen.

Yet if I went to live in London surely I should get used to the blackout, seeing that thousands had had to get used to it? The war might last some years, and I could not spend the whole of that time with the sheep and the pigs, and worse pigs like Hughie Huggins!

We made up our minds sitting there that if nothing had happened in the next fortnight, I should get back to the flat before Christmas, and I actually danced the whole of the way back across the fields. Thank Heaven nobody saw me.

"And now," said I, "promise me that you will let Hughie Huggins alone when we get in?"

After a protest Kobbie said that he would, and as it happened I need not have worried, for when we did get in it seemed that Mrs. Huggins was not very well, and the blacksmith's wife had offered to have Hughie for the afternoon, so there was a surprising peace over the house, and not only did we have a serene lunch, but eventually we got quite a comfortable afternoon.

Unfortunately Aunt Mabel was with us.

She had discovered that she had a bit of a sore throat and had therefore arranged for Mrs. Cobb to take her Sunday-school class for her. We had

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really meant to borrow her sitting-room fire, and go on with the interrupted papers; there was a lot more of Madame Tabouis to read, but Aunt Mabel put a blight on this. It is difficult to continue with such light-hearted reading (I mean no disrespect to Madame Tabouis) when there is somebody else sitting there, looking down her nose at you, and reading out of a large Bible with much significance.

We made our excuses, and went up to our own bedroom, and I knew that she glanced after us reproachfully, knowing quite well that we should not spend the time in prayer. She said something about Sunday never having been intended to be a jolly day!

Upstairs Robbie sank into an easy chair saying that he intended to read all the leading articles, and within a couple of minutes was sound asleep.

Naval officers have a habit of doing this. I simply cannot bear to think what a ward-room looks like in the middle of the afternoon, nor what it sounds like either, if they all snore as Robbie does! A naval officer at any moment after lunch can drop peacefully asleep, hands clasped on his stomach as though suspicious of attack, and he will lie completely doggo until an exasperated and bored wife says, "For Heaven's sake, stop snoring!"

But this is the hallmark of the King's Navee apparently. Brusque at breakfast, cheery by ten-thirty, bouncing by one, asleep at two, still asleep at three, waking with curses at four, drinking gin from six onwards. Lifelike study of a naval officer by an observant wife!

Robbie snored gallantly, and I read Madame Tabouis through twice and did not think much of her, looked out of the window and saw the day

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dying with the hens going solemnly to bed. They are the most methodical birds, walking in procession into their hen-house, like nuns into a convent, and the old cockerel leading them like a priest.

Then I heard sounds, and I suddenly became aware of the fact that there seemed to have been a great deal of walking 'up and downstairs during the afternoon; there had been other unusual sounds also, which had been somewhat drowned by Robbie's metronome-like accompaniment to the passing of time.

Now I heard, quite definitely, a strange man's step outside the door, and listening all ears I heard him go into Mrs. Huggins' room. I began to wonder. It is the imaginative mind which goes for ever spinning in circles, and is trying to find a story in everything, and sometimes finds far too much, as in this case.

There were more sounds, intensive ones, and Robbie woke up with a start. "What the devil is all that row? I couldn't get a wink of sleep," said he.

I ask you!

Have you ever known a man, or a woman either for the matter of that, who has snored the roof off, and who does not tell you that he only did it to mislead you and was awake the whole time? I said that I thought something queer was going on next door and Mrs. Huggins was apparently having a bit of a party.

It was now almost dark, the hens had gone, and I had left the blackout curtains a bit late. They are the most fiddling things when it comes to grovelling with them in the dark, but I did my best, fumbling for rings, and pelmets which had to be let down, and then we lit the light. Eventually we went downstairs for tea, which had to be communal, There

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was a complete hush down there. Aunt Mabel, on hearing us, opened the door of her room as though it were a Bluebeard's hidden chamber. She had her finger to her lips and her eyes were horrified.

"Poor Mrs. Huggins!" said she.

"Whatever is the matter with Mrs. Huggins?"

We were drawn inside, the door was closed without a sound, and then Aunt Mabel, shipping the most solemn face, the one which she usually reserved for funerals or bishops or something of that kind, said in a stage whisper, "She has lost her baby."

"Where?" asked Robbie.

I don't think he could have woken up properly.

It seemed that all this morning sickness had not been natural, and that the poor little thing had been secretly fretting about being away from home; Hughie was also a trial to her, because certain people (I knew that Aunt Mabel really meant me) had not been very tolerant of the poor little fellow, who was but healthily high-spirited after all. The result had been that she had lost her baby.

The nurse was upstairs with her, and the doctor had come half an hour ago; he must have been the strange man that I had heard. It was all terribly sad, said Aunt Mabel, wiping away a maidenly tear.

That annoyed me! Mrs. Huggins had not wanted her baby, and had never minced words about it. She had kept on saying what frightful things she would do to Mr. Huggins when she got hold of him, because this was entirely his fault. She had wished that the baby would die a dozen times, and that she would die with it to be thoroughly morbid, and now the baby was dead. She had got rid of it in the best possible way, so why on earth complain about it? Meanwhile, the blacksmith's wife had said that she

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would keep Hughie for the night, so everybody felt enormously relieved, save possibly the blacksmith's wife, who must have been going through a dreadful time.

We had a difficult evening because, Mrs. Johnstone being up with Mrs. Huggins who could not be left, we had to get our own suppers, and afterwards, out of common decency, we obviously had to help her wash up, which I hate doing.

After that, when we all felt a bit irritated (which was perhaps unfair, because Mrs. Huggins could not help being ill), there was an argument with Aunt Mabel, firstly about the evening service from the B.B.C. which she wanted to hear, and which enraged Robbie, and then the perfidy of the Macphersons, for their lights were showing disgracefully again, and she wanted Robbie to go over and tell them so.

He wouldn't.

In the end we went to bed having quarrelled with everybody.

By the morning Mrs. Huggins was a good deal worse, and it was arranged that she should be moved into hospital. Aunt Mabel fixed it all up that Robbie would drive her over in Little Eke. She was laid along the back seat, which I should have thought would have been most dreadfully uncomfortable for her. It would have been far better to have got an ambulance for her, because at this particular moment there were hundreds of ambulances all over England sitting patiently waiting for the air raids which did not come off, and it would have given any one of those ambulance drivers no end of a kick to be called out to a real live case! But oh no, Aunt Mabel insisted that Robbie had to drive Mrs. Huggins with the district nurse sitting

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beside him in the front, and keeping on calling him 'dear,' because she got muddled up between him and Mrs. Huggins.

"Why the devil does she want to call everybody 'dear'?" he asked.

It is a way that nurses have!

They always call you dear, it is part of the technique or professional etiquette, I suppose; they think that it gives you confidence, instead of which it frightens men and exasperates women. It is a sort of ritual in the nursing profession to address the patient as 'dear,' just as it is the ritual in the Navy to address a Commander as 'Captain' even though he is not one at all, and probably never will be.

Robbie did not like having to take Mrs. Huggins over to the hospital, but I am quite sure that Mrs. Johnstone was only too thankful when she saw the little cortège start, because she had never wanted this type of evacuee, and had hardly bargained for this when she had agreed to take the Huggins's in.

There was the dress rehearsal that afternoon and I am afraid that I got there late. What with the Huggins business, and Robbie coming home in a hurry and rather annoyed with it all, and the innumerable letters sent down from the office, I was simply welded to my desk, and had made a late start. So that I arrived at the village hall panting. A dress rehearsal is always an ordeal, and I was getting desperate about the whole thing. I wished that I had the stamina to stand firm, and tell Aunt Mabel that she could jolly well get on without my help in her wretched entertainment. But you can't do that in villages. You've got to pull your weight.

As I walked up the cold little village street to the tin hall, I doubted as to whether I dared have an

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argument even about the way that the sketch should be acted. It was much too late.

Everybody was fussy, because I think they were realizing that the whole project had been much too hurried, and that we were coming uncomfortably close to the day of reckoning. You simply cannot rush through rehearsals and hope for the best, and that was dawning on them at last.

I sat myself down in the corner and watched it all.

The little girls in their white party frocks with the blue sashes played their duet to start with and forgot it in the middle. There had been a difference of opinion between their mother and Mrs. Cobb, who said that all the best pianoforte numbers were played without music. She remarked horribly that you never saw real pianists playing with their music propped up before them.

That had put the little girls' mother on her mettle, and she had insisted that the poor little girls should try to memorize the medley, with the result that although they could get as far as the "British Grenadiers," there they stuck, and the poor old Navy never got a look in. One of them began to cry, and had to be comforted, and it was decided that perhaps after all they had better use their music; it would be so awful if the show started with a breakdown.

Mr. H. sang "Friend o' Mine," and had armed himself with a couple of encores, which surely, thought I, was carrying optimism a little far? But Aunt Mabel said no; she told me that the people always encored him twice, because he wasn't very good and they didn't want him to think that they had noticed it. It seemed a peculiar reason for encoring a person. He got up and he tried his encores through, because he thought that he had better be in good practice.

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The trio did their bit next because the viola wanted to go home, and asked if we could rehearse our sketch last, as she could then go before it came on, which I considered showed remarkable judgment on her part.

The blacksmith's assistant dressed up with a very red nose, and a woman's costume with a great deal of messy fancy lingerie showing, sang a definitely risky song.

"We mustn't go too far, you know," said the Vicar, wagging a playful finger at him.

After he had finished they debated in a corner, Mr. H. in a low tone and the blacksmith's assistant in a very high one. I saw that there might be difficulties, but I need not have bothered, because they could not afford to do without their funny man, who was always the most popular item on the programme, and therefore the Vicar put him on his honour to sing nothing that he knew his mother wouldn't like. It always seems to me that isn't fair, or sensible. The village is never impressed by being put on its honour; it merely thinks that it is silly, and I did not suppose that Mr. H.'s suggestion would influence the blacksmith's assistant one ounce.

I started getting my little lot together for the sketch. Mrs. Cobb wasn't pleased with her dress; she had turned up her nose at the one that we had been going to make for her out of the funds, because she thought that it wouldn't be good enough. She had then gone to the personal expense of hiring a frock from London. It was a horrible thing. It served her right and there was not the time to change it, so she had to get on with it as best she could.

There she was standing, looking singularly unlovely as a pink and blue milkmaid, with a silly little stool

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stuck under one arm, and a wreath of daisies hanging round a Watteau hat. The shepherd's smock had been hung on the doctor's nephew, who had been awfully good at theatricals at school, they told us, and it struck me that he obviously reserved his talent for school use only.

My-son-Alec was wearing my great-grandfather's wedding waistcoat, and it went with nothing else that he had got on. He hated being there, and had been originally inveigled into the show to see after the footlights, rather fancying himself fiddling with fuses and such. I did not know how they had ever lured him into an actual part, and had been most surprised when I had found him there, but it was Aunt Mabel who had done the casting.

The whole sketch was under-rehearsed, I thought, but Mr. H. seemed to be remarkably pleased with it.

When it was over, I went to Aunt Mabel who had been watching from a strategic position on the harmonium, her mouth buttoned up, as she shepherded the children in their crêpe paper clothes, who followed up in rehearsing the "Children of all Nations" finale.

"I'm afraid this wretched sketch is N.B.G." I said to Aunt Mabel.

The children of all nations were comfortingly bad too, arriving at a climax when Miss Austria's skirt came adrift, disclosing a very homely pair of pants.

Theatrical people always say that the best possible omen is a bad dress rehearsal; all I can say is that we had got it all right. The show should be fine. Every omen was for it.

The whole affair over, we turned for home, and even Aunt Mabel had gone rather quiet. In the porch she remarked coldly that she could not think

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how I had ever managed to make even the smallest success of literature, and suggested that possibly I reserved my best work for London, and had turned them out something mediocre on purpose.

"I'm sorry," said I wretchedly.

I simply could not stop with Aunt Mabel that night, because I was so apprehensive of the sword of Damocles about to fall on me on the morrow. In a state of blind despair I could not settle to either reading or writing, and went across the road to the Macphersons, and hurled myself into a wild gamble with Snakes and Ladders. The doctor's nephew was there, and full of beans. A very chatty youth, and I owe it to him that my system let me down, because he had such a much better one. I wished that I had thought of it myself, and was most annoyed at having to part with my hard-earned cash to a schoolboy, though I daresay he spent it better than I could.

Last thing at night, I lay in bed wondering how on earth I should be able to face the complete defeat in the tin hall. If they should call for 'author,' how I could possibly step up and admit that I had written that dismal little sketch? Could I develop a cold in the head which would incapacitate me? Could I go to bed instead? All this savoured much of shirking. But the whole thing had been so cut about, so harassed by Mrs. Cobb, so limited by the shepherd's smock and the wedding waistcoat, so stemmed by the injunction to write nothing 'frivolous, *please!*'

Well, and now for the worst!

XXII

The Show's the Thing

AUNT MABEL started very early indeed, and there was no doubt whatsoever but that she meant to make a do of it. She simply romped through her breakfast, and could not even take any interest in the latest reports on Mrs. Huggins, so concentrated was she upon the evening's entertainment.

She nipped off to the tin hall immediately after breakfast to superintend the arrival and arrangement of the chairs. The chairs apparently had to be brought by lorry from an adjacent village where they lived. They were part of a curious system and went about the country in gangs, filling up village halls for just such entertainments as we had entered upon for to-night.

I was very glad to see her into her suède jacket and feathered tea-cosy of a hat, because that meant I was left to myself, and the programmes. The programmes were a menace.

Nobody had thought it necessary to see a proof from the printer, it was merely ridiculous said Aunt Mabel, and when I had queried the wisdom of this, Mr. H. had helped to howl me down. They had trusting natures. They saw no proof, and what do you think happened? Exactly what I could have told you would happen, having had a long experience of printers and their ways. The blacksmith's assistant was being coy about his turn, and had insisted that it should be produced under the absurd heading of

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"Wartime Frolics." That beastly printer had made a misprint, and had put a capital B instead of a capital W, so that it read "Bartime Frolics." You can imagine what Aunt Mabel had to say about that!

The pile of programmes had been delivered early in the morning, in fact whilst we were having breakfast. Aunt Mabel cut the string with pride, and tore the bundle open.

"Don't they look nice?" said she, and then pride suffered a fall, for she had twigged the blunder. After a short tirade she announced to me, "You must alter them."

"Why is it that I have to do them?"

"Well, you write, don't you?"

A pretty argument, I must say!

There was I stuck with the pile of programmes, and due instructions that whatever happened it must be crossed out so that nobody could read what was underneath, for it would never do if she got half the parish laughing at her.

Crossing out is always a miserable job, and more especially so when it has to be done carefully so that nobody can read it. During the morning Hughie Huggins came back to the home, having had a difference of opinion with the blacksmith's wife, and he did his worst by me.

When I got up to the hall it was almost lunch-time and everybody was getting very tired and rather cross. The doctor had kindly sent some plants down from his conservatory on loan. Mrs. Cobb, in arranging them, had tripped over a valuable pot of maidenhair fern, which looked flattened, and was the subject of controversy. They were debating as to whether the damage was bad enough to need explanation, or if they could get away with it. Not

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with Aunt Mabel about, as I could have told them. She would consider it her duty to tell the doctor exactly how it had happened, and she now decided that she could do this on the way home to lunch.

There seemed to be nothing much left for me, because they were all well ahead, so I left them to it, and brought Miss Austria's frock away to try to do a little repair work with the paste-pot. I never did like crêpe paper dresses, having fallen through them myself when small, and I did not think that Miss Austria would find herself in any too safe a position if she wasn't darned careful.

The afternoon dragged.

I pretended to go to my room to write, but instead I must admit that I went to bed with a hot-water bottle, because the weather had turned much colder, and it looked like snow. Now everybody at the hall would have exhausted themselves in their efforts and they would be short-tempered. I was very glad to be out of it.

As blackout time approached, a fine driving sleet came on, which I understood from Mrs. Johnstone was the sort of thing which always happened whenever they had village entertainments, and it stopped people coming from neighbouring places and ate into the profits badly.

Aunt Mabel returned for tea in a frightful flap, because they had had a most difficult afternoon; just when it was getting dark, the doctor's nephew had tried to get a spot-light on to the stage, because the blacksmith's assistant wanted this for his number, and there had been some irritating mistake, with the result that the lights had fused throughout the building. My-son-Alec had gone home, or else of course he could have put it straight for them, but the

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little party had been groping about with matches and torches and bits of candle, and even now she did not know if anybody had been able to get it all going again.

I thought of the acetylene bicycle lamps reserved for the Nativity play, and suggested that if the worst came to the worst, we could rely on those.

"We can't," said she; "they smell; they make some people sick and I'm one of them. It would mean that I could not possibly be there."

I felt that the business of reviving the electric light rested with those in authority and was best left to them. We had better have a quiet meal. Mrs. Johnstone had prepared a high tea. High tea is one of those mongrel meals for which nobody has any appetite. I had none. In the middle of it Aunt Mabel noticed the Macphersons' lights again, and that meant more restlessness, and apprehension that one of these days the wilfully blind would wake up to the fact that we had spies in our midst.

I had debated as to suitable clothes for myself, believing that I might be called upon to answer to the call for author. My cherry wool frock should light up well, I thought, and it had a nice long skirt, which always looks graceful on a stage. I didn't know then, of course, that it would draggle through the sleet all the way to the tin hall, because the elastic with which I had tried to hitch it up had broken on me; the result would be anything but graceful.

We ate our high tea; tea and bread and butter, sardines, and a boiled egg apiece. Aunt Mabel was getting more and more nervous. I knew that she wanted my sketch to be a wild success—she was only too anxious for me to acquit myself well—but as the time went on I felt more and more 'gloomy, and

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certain that the whole thing was going to be a failure.

"We ought to start," I said at last.

"Oh yes, yes," said she.

Poor old darling! She had worn herself out and would have given a lot to take off her corsets, let down her hair and have a nice quiet evening over the fire. But it wasn't going to be like that for her. Her one semi-evening frock came out, black with the most surprising trimmings of sequins in unexpected places, and a red velvet rose on the bust. I mean on her bust.

We met in the hall, and grovelled with trailing skirts, overcoats and jemimas, torches and gas masks. She insisted that it was unpatriotic not to take them. She thought it highly likely that Hitler might stage a special raid to-night, just because of the entertainment. I said that I thought it most improbable; leave the gas masks for once; but no, off we started, arms linked, skirts all over the place, and the sleet coming down into our faces good and hearty.

Owing to the recent difficulties of getting to London, and the worse difficulty of staying there, I was unable to have my eyelashes dyed, which is a little ritual which I have followed for years with some success. So I used mascara.

"That disgusting stuff," as Aunt Mabel calls it.

"You'd look better with it," I informed her, for her eyelashes are pure mouse.

The sleet was coming into my face, and I thought it possible that the mascara would run all down my face. I'd look just grand answering to the call of author, with long black streaks on either cheek. I wondered if I could do any patch-work in the 'green room,' as Mr. H. coyly calls it; it was really the annexe where they made the tea for the working

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parties which now had had to be turned into a general dressing-room.

How we ever got to the hall I don't know. Outside, there was already a little crowd of people queuing up to go in; the doors were not yet open, though it was over time, because Mrs. Cobb had the ticket roll in her possession and she hadn't turned up yet. People were stamping and blowing into their hands, and Aunt Mabel kept pushing her way through them with great pompousness, and saying, "Let me pass, please, I'm on the committee. Let me pass, please."

There I was clinging to her arm, and being dragged along willy-nilly.

Somebody called, "Gangway for naval officer."

And somebody else rather rudely, "Gangway for bargee."

I was afraid that she would hear it and stop to argue, but Aunt Mabel heard nothing; she was far too exhausted in her efforts and too excited about the show.

Inside there was hubbub.

Everything was in a state of pandemonium, and Mr. H. was running round with some Chinese lanterns that he had decided on at the last moment, thinking they might be helpful if they could not get the electric light to work properly. But that was all right again. I was taken aside by my-son-Alec. There would be a pleasant little attention and it had been decided that a bouquet must be presented to Aunt Mabel, for all she had done about it (bouquet! thought I with some bitterness). Someone had gone into Ashford that afternoon, and had seen the florist, and had come back with a rather Christmassy-looking little silver basket full of berries. Very pretty, I thought, but anything less like Aunt Mabel I could

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not imagine. Somebody would have to present it.

"It is no good looking at me," I told Mr. H.

"I was wondering about that little Huggins boy? Poor little chap, he must have been so disappointed over not doing the Indian boy in Children-of-all-Nations."

"No," said I hastily, "not Hughie Huggins. Anybody in this world save Hughie Huggins. I am quite sure that he would be a most dreadful mistake."

My-son-Alec supported me in this, and suggested that Gladdie Stuart, the child who was to play the Peace part in the Children-of-all-Nations tableau, could manage it. Gladdie was very young. She had slept all the afternoon so that she could be kept awake for to-night, and she was wheeled to the hall in her pram, wearing creased white tulle, and she would carry an olive branch.

We had no olive branch and this apparently simple idea had presented great complications. The doctor's nephew had bicycled into Ashford to see if he could fetch us anything, and had lost his head, and had come home with a spray of artificial catkins! In the end we had fastened some imitation leaves on a willow twig, not very successful, but it would have to do. Now, in the general commotion, even this had been mislaid.

The doors were opened when Mrs. Cobb arrived, and after that of course everything started happening at once. I sold programmes. In the front two rows the élite sat in village evening-dress. They wore mackintoshes to which lace collars had been pinned; there was a quantity of beige lace. There was some tulle, and certainly four lockets.

I quaked in my shoes as to what would happen when the show actually did start, which it did, ten

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minutes late, with the little girls in their party frocks and blue sashes.

They had been persuaded to bring their music with them, in spite of Mrs. Cobb's acid remarks, so they got through their turn very creditably. Mr. H. sang "Friend o' Mine." All the time that he was singing I was utterly miserable. I hated him for the encores which merely eked out the time, and made the waiting seem to be all the longer; yet I ached for him to go on for ever.

The curtain fell on his second encore, and now I knew that the worst would happen. I sneaked to my appointed place where I was to prompt. It struck me at this precise moment that never had I written anything sillier. What had possessed me to do it? The whole sketch had grown more stupid as I went on, and as other people had got their fingers into the pie, and I had been harassed by that idiotic shepherd's smock, and the wedding waistcoat, not to mention Mrs. Cobb.

Mr. H. appeared before the curtain, looking pleasantly urbane. I suspected that. He said that very seldom was a simple village so honoured by the presence of a real authoress in their midst. The next item in the programme was the product of someone whose name would be familiar to them all! And (I had the sick sensation that the man was about to be funny!) the lady is as blooming as her name! But, he concluded, the audience must judge the whole thing for themselves. Spring Blossom was the title. A village idyll for three characters.

The beast stepped back.

The world began to go somewhat mottled for me. I have this unfortunate knack of turning very faint in emergencies, and I knew that far from being able to

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prompt the actors, all that I could do now was to clutch hard at the three-legged stool on which I was sitting and hope that I did not pass out on to the floor with a crack. Then suddenly I began to see clearly again. The sketch was progressing and the miracle had happened, the unsuspected miracle which I had never supposed could possibly be.

Mrs. Cobb had pirouetted across the stage. At the rehearsal she had minced; when reproved she had dragged herself like a woman going to a funeral. Suddenly I saw her, and she radiated. She was being a wild success. She was the heroine exactly as I had seen the heroine, and her Watteau hat no longer looked absurd, and one could forgive the flounces and furbelows and the little stool. The doctor's nephew, who I had supposed would overact beyond bearing, was being good. I had libelled the young man. Even my-son-Alec was doing his bit.

I stared helplessly.

My crashing failure was a success. It did not sound idiotic, the jokes went over with a bang, its cynicism was not lost on a country audience, and I owed the whole thing to Mrs. Cobb, whom I had looked upon as being a menace and who wasn't a menace at all. She was a born actress. How in this world had she kept it to herself all through those dreary rehearsals, giving me sleepless nights, and making me so sick at heart that I felt I could scream?

The curtain swished down again to tumultuous applause. Owlishly I stared. They would be screaming "Author," naturally, but it wasn't the author that they wanted. It was Mrs. Cobb, and quite right too. She had done a Trojan's job.

She went forward time after time. It was Mr. H. who saved the situation for me. I think he grasped

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that something was a little wrong, and all the time I was quite sure that he had a sneaking affection for me. Clapping vociferously he rushed forward and cried "Author."

"No," said I firmly.

"Author," yelled the doctor's nephew.

My-son-Alec gave me a playful push which sent me to the footlights blinking hard, and without any semblance of dignity. Mr. H. who was now quite carried away and I think realized that something should have been prepared, nipped off the stage and reappeared with the Christmassy-looking basket which was to be given to Aunt Mabel. At the time I was not quite certain whether this was meant, or whether the suggestion of giving it to Aunt Mabel was all a blind and it really had been intended for me.

It was thrust into my hand, and much too late did I discover that it had been for Aunt Mabel! Mrs. Cobb revealed that to me, by saying in a loud voice which I could not help over-hearing, "Oh, look what they've given her now!"

I went back to my seat.

I heard the trio rasping away the "Indian Love Lyrics," and I did not know if I stood on my head or my heels. Aunt Mabel came to me, and she said, "I knew you'd do well. It was fine. I am sure everybody enjoyed it enormously; I wish we had had an encore ready."

Thank Heaven she hadn't thought of that one before!

The first half of the programme ended with myself so bewildered that I hardly understood what was going on. In fact I did not come round properly until the blacksmith's assistant got on to the stage, and anybody would have come to for that.

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All along I had had an idea that this young man intended to do it on us, because I had met his kind before. I told Aunt Mabel of my presentiment in this direction, and was rebuked. It was wicked to think unkind things about anyone, and because I had a nasty mind, it was very wrong to suspect it in others. He was not that sort of young man, said she.

But he was!

That was the dreadful part.

His first song was comparatively narmless. It was the one which had been vetted by Mr. H. and it went through smoothly enough. It was the encore that was such a sensation. I doubt if anyone could have quarrelled with its success in one way, or with its failure in another. The sixpenny seats roared and whistled, and screamed their approval, but the faces of the front row stalls were masks. Lace collars quivered on mackintoshes, indignant dowagers shook with fury whilst their spouses looked most uncomfortable. The awkward part for everybody concerned was that once the man started you could not stop him. There he was, and there he stayed. Rude innuendoes and all.

Although his accompanist left him in her horror, was he defeated? Not he! He stood there cracking jokes which were Rabelaisian, and only when he came to an end of his humour did he condescend to close.

That was the signal for the Children-of-all-Nations, crêpe paper and all, to rustle forward. Somebody began to play the "Marseillaise" on the piano, and Gladdie, the infant Peace, who had only just awakened, made a feeble protest hastily hushed. The curtain shook itself back on the most striking scene which made one feel that it was unreasonable to suppose that there could be a paper shortage. Peace,

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somewhat mollified, her cheek bulging with a sweet, appeared in the middle.

The medley of national anthems changed into our own, and the audience rose to sing with us.

"It has been a wonderful success," said Aunt Mabel as we tottered home together, arm-in-arm as was customary, and the one dim little torch lighting our way. We could have gone in to supper at the vicarage, but somehow we felt too tired. Besides, she had told me that the vicarage supper was always rather dull. Mrs. H. was not a good manager, it was cold chicken and blancmange any time of the year, any occasion.

I thought of the Bishop who came to lunch at the Rectory once to conduct the confirmation. Over a glass of port he confided in us that he hated confirmations. He said, "They always give me cold chicken and 'O Jesus, I have promised,' and I hate them both."

So Aunt Mabel and I left the hall together, and now it did not matter if our frocks trailed, they had done their job, and it had been an occasion.

In the hall of the farm, Aunt Mabel said, "I feel very tired, my dear; I am not as young as I used to be, and I was just wondering if I ought not to have a little something. Purely medicinal, you know; something to stop this palpitation."

The poor old darling had worked herself ill. I got her some of Robbie's brandy kept specially for such a purpose and brought it down to her. We sat over the dying fire whilst she drank it.

"You won't tell anybody?" she begged.

Of the whole evening that is the strongest memory of all. Aunt Mabel tipling over the fire. There are some things that have to be seen to be believed.

XXIII

The First of the Peace Parties

I LEFT Hurst four days later.

Christmas was at hand; that was indicated too by the arrival of Mr. H. the morning after the entertainment to say that if only I would fling myself into it heart and soul there was time to get the Nativity play going.

I said, "You can't. I'm going."

He had no idea that I really did intend to go home to London, which he thought was dangerous. Ultimately he comforted himself by telling me that I should be back before long. The Hun would never stay his hand and I should probably be bombed to perdition, and be only too glad to get back to Hurst.

Not if I'm bombed, I thought, there won't be anything of me to come back, but refrained from saying so.

It seemed to be years since the summer evening when I had gone out of the flat and Little Eke had turned for the Uxbridge Road, and I had said to myself that if ever I came back I would give a party that would be a proper drunk. Everything seemed to have happened between then and now; everything and nothing.

I said to Robbie that Mr. H. had not been very heartening about it, and did he think it was really safe, and he said that he did. His idea was that we should not get the furniture out of store all at once, but see what happened.

So I said goodbye.

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Mrs. Huggins was to have my room, an arrangement of Aunt Mabel's without the Johnstones' consent, and one which appeared to please her a great deal, and them a great deal less. She then came up to help me with my packing. That was a task not really made easier by the presence of Aunt Mabel, who queried many of my belongings, and thought anything to do with my work was 'peculiar,' or 'strange,' or 'isn't this a little . . . well, a little . . . ?'

She said regretfully, "You know, dear, it is such a pity that you don't devote your talents to really interesting work. You could be so much help to others and so useful. It is such a pity that you waste your time like you do."

Dear Aunt Mabel! She doesn't mean it really; she is born that way.

So I said goodbye and I got into Little Eke again and we came along the Sidcup bypass, on a fine frosty morning.

I felt very brave.

I felt as though I were now entering a fort and intended holding it against the enemy, because if Robbie thought I was going to leave the furniture in store, he was darned well mistaken. War or no war, the flat would not remain empty long. If we were to be bombed we might as well be bombed with something to sit on and to eat off. And what did it matter if the furniture went with us? We shouldn't need it if we really did get blown sky-high.

And how sky-high could a ten-storey block of concrete and steel flats go? It does not do to wonder along those lines.

The balloons hove in sight, and I sang to myself; it was joy to get back to civilization. Here was the good old commercial King's Road, and at last the

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car came to a standstill outside my own home. It hadn't changed with the war, every brick was still intact, and the roof remained on the top. I had not expected that much after over three months of the second great war.

Inside it looked very bare.

Full of guile, I dispatched an amiable husband to the veg. shop round the corner, because suddenly I had a passion for apples, and whilst he was away I got through to the furniture removers. They seemed most surprised that I could want it back. On Thursday, said I, knowing that Robbie would be at his office by ten that morning, and once we had got rid of him we could do what we liked. I gave them my instructions, would the van kindly wait round the corner until they had seen Robbie out of the building, because it was all to be a surprise?

Oh yes, said the young man from the other end, and by the tone of his voice it was he who was getting the surprise.

Thank you very much, said I.

Thank *you*, said he in the tone which indicated that he thought one of us was dotty, and believed it not to be himself.

Thursday it was.

Robbie left for his office from the naked flat in which every footfall made a stupendous echo, and five minutes later the van rolled up to the front door and all the furniture started coming in. It looked to me as though it had a grin on its face. Our furniture has travelled about a lot; it is always coming out or going into store. One facetious editor once said that it just hopped into the van and said "Home" to the removal men.

Even if this wasn't peace I felt it was the next best

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thing. It looked like the first bit of constructive work since the war had started.

Curtains went up, pictures smiled down again in a friendly fashion, flowers were done, clocks started ticking, and footfalls went dim. The flat changed from cheerless rooms into the friendly and amiable atmosphere of a furnished home.

Just before tea I hid behind the curtain in my bedroom watching like Sister Anne for the first sign of Robbie coming round the corner of the road. The maids were hidden in the dining-room, peeping through the door to see his first reaction. .

"Now," cried I, in triumph.

A key turned in the door, a hand switched on the light, and a footstep halted, amazed to see the red and white rugs in the hall and a bowl of chrysanthemums where there had been damn-all this morning. He stared aghast through into the sitting-room, where a coloured globe was lit, and my own portrait was staring at him.

"What the dickens . . .?" and then, "I say," and very much louder, "I say, Ursula . . ."

I came out of my room.

"Are you very angry with me?"

"Angry? I'm so damned glad that I don't know what to do."

We were home again, with the balloons swinging over us, and of course it was quite true that Hitler might come at any moment to play merry-hell with us. There were sandbags, and cross strips on the windows which spoilt the view a bit, and blackout at night. There was the abysmal difficulty of getting torches and batteries for them (that was a horror which I still think ought not to have been), but it was worth it.

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I was not cold any more, I was not miserable; I did not have to dangle bits of cabbage to tempt the unimaginative hen, I did not have to hold commune with heifers and ducks. But I might be frightened for the first sound of the anti-aircraft guns, because I have met air raids before, old-fashioned ones, and I did not want to meet them again.

"And now may I give my party?" I asked.

I wrote my invitations myself, invitations to the first party celebrating the return home of no lady, who had had enough of being an evacuee. Peace might not yet be in sight, but at the same time this was the first gesture to it.

No printed invitations like those we usually had, just my own scribble, which I admit is the world's worst.

We'd love to see you at our party on December the eleventh at five-thirty to seven-thirty, and . . . to Hell with the war!

The people we asked took it in the spirit in which it had been meant. This might be our last good party for years, for ever if the income tax stopped where it was. It might be our last party before we were blown up, or before the peace, but whatever happened it should be a good one.

I bought squeakers and blow-outs, and absurd musical instruments to raise it out of the rut. I went round to the wine shop and ordered bottles of rum punch. It goes well at a Christmassy party; you heat it and it warms the cockles, so they tell me. Not drinking myself, my cockles have to go cold.

I fought the grocer for butter and lost. That was a bitter defeat, because I have an old-fashioned dislike of giving a guest anything but the best, and it seemed

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a dreadful come-down to have to make sandwiches with margarine. I suppose people must put up with something for a wartime party, and anyway I had got back to London; I must not let little things worry me.

At one time I had a hazy notion of dressing Robert Atkins in a sheet, and introducing him bearing the rum punch as the Spirit of Peace.

At half-past one in the afternoon I started cutting sandwiches, and rolling asparagus in brown bread, which did not take too kindly to the margarine. Maids flitted about, there is nothing that they love more than a good party, and we cleared the decks for action. Drawing-room and dining-room were ready, the rum punch was bubbling on the stove.

I mixed the teetotal drink, orange and lemon juice with a subtle addition of pineapple chunks. It looked pretty but I thought that the taste was a bit dim. We could of course call it a 'cup,' but even a 'cup' wanted something more than that. I started experimenting, and my experiments on these lines are not very successful, linked as they are with such hopeless ignorance. I tipped in the maraschino first, but it made it so very sweet, so when Robbie wasn't looking, I got hold of his old liqueur brandy, which made it taste extremely good, at least I thought so, and then I topped it up with a fillip of rum and came to the conclusion that it really had quite a nice taste. What it might do to people, I didn't know. I don't think that ever occurred to me at that particular moment. I was only concerned in concocting a good drink, after effects did not worry me.

Early in the day we had had a dreadful damper dropped on the party. We learnt that Robbie was to start a week's all-night duty to-night, and would have to go to the office at eleven, which would be

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rather trying. Never mind, said he, the party'll be over by then, but for him the party was definitely not over then.

I gave the first of the London parties to celebrate peace, and was it a party!

But I regret to say that something went very wrong. I knew that the generous hand of the King's Navee (meaning my husband) mixed too liberal cocktails, even though it had been the hand of a wine caterer once and should have known better, and before very long the King's Navee knew absolutely nothing at all.

We blew squeakers, we burst balloons, and made that noise usually associated with Trafalgar Square on Armistice Night, but it did not end quite there. That was the kind of party that only a teetotaller in her ignorance could have given. Nobody had ever told me anything about rum punch. To me it was a name, and rather an attractive-sounding one. I had ordered that bottles should be tipped into a saucepan, and heated up. Nobody had ever suggested that the equivalent of three soda-water syphons full should go to each half bottle, and there were no directions on the label.

You can't really blame me.

When the last guest, looking strangely white, left the flat, the King's Navee gave me one helpless look, then he pitched. He said, "I don't know what you put into it . . ."

At that moment I had no idea what he meant.

I would like to say here and now that I have been married for over fourteen years, and never have I seen Robbie tight, though he tells me that once at Malta when we went to a dance at the Vernon Club, where the petty officers insisted on giving him port and lemon galore, he came home absolutely

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squiffed. All I can say was that he did not show it, and he never admitted that he thought the wardrobe was waving him good-night.

But this time he had to admit it.

I pushed him on to the bed, but he rolled off the other side into a bowl of mimosa, and split his head open on that. He came up crowned with mimosa. It was a pathetic sight.

If this were the first of the peace parties, what on earth would the last one be like?

The next morning I went round to the booze shop to enquire. I was righteously indignant. How dare they sell me such poison? said I.

"But surely you watered it down?" said the booze shop politely.

"Nobody said anything about that," I declared stoutly.

The proprietor grasped the counter a little tighter and said, "S'welp!"

So I knew then.

I knew much.

It was morning in London. The A.R.P. wardens were wandefing aimlessly round the streets, the sandbags were bursting a little at the corners, but I was home.

Perhaps it needed a war to show me that there really is no place like home, and even if you have been bred in the country, once you come to live in the town the country loses much of its pristine charm.

Or is it that I am no lady, and do not realize how lovely it can be? I leave you to judge.

THE END

